

A Naturalist's Guide to the Galápagos Islands



**A Complete Guide to Land Tours,
Wildlife and Travel Basics**

2nd Edition

by Steve Rosenberg

A Naturalist's Guide to the

Galápagos Islands Things can change quickly in Galapagos. To insure you have the most current and accurate information, please make sure to download the most current version of this eBook before planning a trip or traveling to Galapagos.

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Acknowledgements

For The Making of

A Naturalist Guide to the Galápagos Islands

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Steve Rosenberg has been a professional photographer and photojournalist since 1980, and is an active member of the Society of American Travel Writers SATW. He has produced 18 books, including travel guides for Lonely Planet, Cruising Guides and Aqua Quest. He has written hundreds of articles for various U.S. and International Publications. Thousands of his images have appeared in books and magazines worldwide. He has also won more than 250 awards for his photography in international competitions, including a gold medal in the Hans Hass competition in Austria. Steve's experience in the Galápagos goes back to the early 1990s when he first visited the Galápagos. Since that time he has made regular trips to the Galápagos taking photography, doing research, and leading travel tours.



Author Steve Rosenberg © 2013

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Female frigatebird with hungry chick © 2013

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A view of Pinnacle Rock from the top of the Bartolomé Summit. © 2013

Introduction

The Galapagos Islands

The Galápagos Islands, an isolated archipelago of roughly 125 volcanic islands and islets spreading over 224km (140mi) from north to south, straddles the equator about 1,000 km (620mi) off the West coast of Ecuador. The islands are home to a very unique set of wildlife. In fact 70% of the plants and animals in Galápagos are found nowhere else in the world. Like a siren's call, this unique environment beckons nature lovers to the adventure of a lifetime. There are lots of activities on the islands including snorkeling, bird-watching, hiking, kayaking, wildlife viewing, horseback riding, biking, trekking, surfing, diving, hanging out at the beach, and of course, shopping and relaxing in an outdoor café.

This book covers everything you will need to know for planning a trip to the remote, enchanting, living ecological research laboratory that is the Galápagos. Details for many of the most popular land excursions are incorporated by region, along with information on the type of landing, topography, length and difficulty of the hike, as well as the flora and fauna found in the area.

Other information includes background on terrestrial animals and marine life, including the best places to see and photograph some of the most interesting of these, a brief overview of accommodations on the islands and on live-aboard yachts/ships, what to bring, weather, photography, and much more. The book divides the Galápagos into five geographical areas, highlighting the best visitation sites from islands in the northwest to Floreana and Española in the south. The time to go to the Galápagos is now, for memories you will retain forever.



A trip to the Galapagos will provide a lifetime of memories. North Seymour © 2006



Sea Lion pup on the rocky shore of South Plaza © 2006

Chapter One

About the Galápagos

Remote and isolated, the Galápagos Islands (officially named the Archipelago of Colon) are world renowned for incredibly exciting, adrenaline-charged encounters and unique, fearless wildlife. The islands appear to shimmer like an optical illusion in the flattened horizon that seems to merge into the sea around them. The islands are actually the tips of underwater volcanoes, and were never connected to a continent. All the astonishing varieties of creatures and plants, that call the Galápagos "home," either flew, swam, or were blown there at some point in time. Because the archipelago has remained so relatively untouched, the majority of the species that exist there

now developed in isolation over several million years and most of the life forms seen today have survived for thousands of years. On some of the more remote islands, while walking among the iguanas and giant tortoises, you can almost feel as though you have stepped back in time or into a different age.

The archipelago supports more than 5,000 species of flora and fauna, and the islands retain nearly ninety-five (95) percent of their initial biodiversity. Hundreds of the species found in the Galapagos are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else on earth. Moreover, there is a remarkable distinction in some species from one island to the next. For example, there are obvious differences in the giant tortoises found on the different islands, and the Española Mockingbird, unique in its class, is endemic to a single island. This is one of the things that makes the Galápagos such a special place. It is like a continually evolving science lab.



Blue-footed booby protects her chicks (North Seymour) © 2006

The barren, volcanic landscape has its own unique, haunting, and mysterious beauty. It was called Islas Encantadas (The Enchanted Islands) because of the frequent fog and the difficulty finding a safe passage through the unpredictable currents. On a single day, you might be crouching beside a Blue-footed booby feeding its young in one area, while a few minutes later you'll be wandering among sea lions and marine iguanas as they lounge on the rocks or scramble over shiny lava flows. Later you could be snorkeling with sea lions and turtles when suddenly a group of penguins (the only ones in the world found at the equator) swim by. Only the Sea lions seem to have some degree of curiosity about the presence of humans.

The archipelago, a province of Ecuador, consists of thirteen large islands, 6 small islands and more than 107 islets and rocks. Most of the islands have two and sometimes three different names. This is because early nautical charts gave the islands both Spanish and English names. Later, some islands gained a third name when the Ecuadorian government assigned official names in 1892. Therefore, an island can have a Spanish name, an English name and an official name. In most cases, the official names are used in this book, but the word Isla (Island) will be dropped for the sake of space.



A land iguana munches on fruit from the prickly pear cactus (South Plazas) © 2009

Orientation

Today, the Galapagos Marine Reserve covers roughly 138,000sq km (53,282sq mi) of the Pacific Ocean, including the inner waters enclosed by a “baseline” (the hypothetical line linking the outer edges of the islands,) plus a buffer zone of 40 nautical miles measured from the baseline, and an additional 20-mile zone of ‘minimum impact.’ The coastline included in this area totals 1,6667km (1,036mi.)

Together, the islands comprise a landmass of roughly 8,000 sq. km (3,000 sq. mi.) over half of which is taken up by Isabela, the 12th-largest island in the entire south Pacific. Wolf Volcano, on Isabela, is the highest point in the chain at 1,707m (5,600 ft).

Differences in elevation and wind patterns create four main ecosystems with a wide range of habitats caused by the progressive changes in climate. The moist ocean air is forced up over the islands by the heat of the land at sea level

and it cools as it rises, condensing into fog, mist, and rain at middle elevations. In general, the higher you get the wetter and cooler it becomes. However, the cold ocean waters also cool the lower part of the atmosphere, creating a temperature inversion on the southern side of the islands at elevations around 300-600m (1000-2000ft). This inversion inhibits the moist air from rising further, so the towns at sea level, like Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz, are hot and dry while the highlands are often overcast and foggy, and the tallest volcanoes reach above the clouds.



A group of tourists hikes along the rim of a sinkhole in the Santa Cruz Highlands. © 2013

Changes in vegetation are also obvious as the elevation differs. The Littoral (or Coastal) Zone is a narrow band along the coastline. It is home to those plants that are tolerant to salt; mostly mangroves (red, black, button and white), which provide refuge among their extensive roots for juvenile fishes and protection among their branches and leaves for seabirds. Saltbush is low to the ground, offering shade for sea lions and a nesting area for pelicans and

frigatebirds. Flamingoes feed on brine shrimp in the shallow lagoons, while marine iguanas eat algae clinging to rocks on the shoreline and underwater. Also found in this zone are succulents, like purslane, that are food for land iguanas and insects. Other marine life that thrives in this zone includes mollusks, crustaceans and invertebrates. Floreana, North Seymour and South Plaza are examples of the islands that have a prominent Littoral Zone.



Purslane and opuntia cactus provide food for iguanas and insects within the Littoral Zone (South Plaza Island) © 2011

The Arid Zone, a wide area of lava, cinder and ash, exists up to about 200m (656ft). It supports plants that can survive with little water, like opuntia (prickly pear) cactus, candelabra cactus and lava cactus, as well as acacia, palo santo (bursura), parkinsonia, and croton. Among the few animal species living here are land iguanas, lava lizards, and sea birds. The Arid Zone may be

extremely dry from June to December (the garua season) when only the southeast side of volcanoes gets precipitation, but even then, it is just a fine fog or mist (garua). Bartolomé is an example of an Arid Zone island.



Parasitic cones on Bartolomé resemble a moonscape. © 2013

The Highland (humid) Zone is defined by the lush evergreen forest and scalesia trees as tall as 10m (33ft) that thrive in the mist. Humid areas are much wider on the southern or windward sides, at altitudes of 300-700m (1000-2300ft). At the highest elevations, the moist, dense forest turns into treeless upland areas covered with ferns and grasses. Again, this is because the windward, southeast sides of the islands receive more moisture than the leeward sides. The population centers have developed around these areas, which have more water.

The Galápagos Islands are relatively young in the Earth's overall geological time line, and their formation is an ongoing process. In comparison, the earth is about 1000 times older! The oldest islands visible today were formed roughly four to five million years ago by underwater volcanoes erupting and rising above the ocean's surface. The region is still volcanically active, with over 50 eruptions recorded since discovery of the islands in 1535. Six of the volcanoes are still active (1 on Fernandina and 5 on Isabela). The most recent eruption of Cerro Azul on Isabela began May 28, 2008, followed by an eruption on the westernmost island, Fernandina, in April 2009.



A sinkhole in the Santa Cruz Highlands humid zone is overgrown by lush greenery © 2013

Geologists generally use two interconnected theories to explain the islands' formation. The Plate Tectonics Theory holds that the earth's crust consists of several rigid plates that, over time, move relative to one another over the

surface of the earth. The Galápagos lie on the northern edge of the Nazca Plate (which drifts to the southeast), close to its junction with the Cocos Plate (which drifts to the north). These two plates are spreading apart at a rate of about 1km (0.8mi) every 14,000 years. That is about the same rate that your fingernails grow, (considered fast by plate-tectonic standards). As a result, the Galápagos as a whole are moving slowly to the southeast.

Interestingly, the islands do not age uniformly either. The western islands are younger, contain very active volcanoes, and are still in the process of formation, while the eastern and southern islands are older. This phenomenon is explained by the Hot Spot Theory of Geological Formation. It holds that deep within the earth, below the moving tectonic plates, certain superheated areas remain stationary. Pressure builds below the earth's crust and every so often it is released through the hotspot (a weakness in the earth's crust) in a large volcanic eruption great enough to form a new landmass when the molten lava rises above sea level. As this new island drifts away from the hot spot, there is little or no volcanic activity. Subsequently, natural forces such as wind and rain cause erosion, and the top of the volcano may eventually collapse.

One example of this is the southeastern-most island, Española, the oldest island now visible above water. It is so eroded that it shows no sign of the original volcano, but scientists found evidence supporting the Hot Spot Theory there. Some rocks on Española are close to 3.25 million years old, while the oldest rocks on Fernandina and Isabela, in the northwest, are less than 750,000 years old.



Daphne Major is an example of a partially eroded shield volcano. © 2013

The Galápagos Islands are completely surrounded by Deep Ocean. Less than 20km (13 mi) off the coasts of the western islands, the ocean is over 300m (1000 ft) deep. When cruising among the islands today, visitors see only a small portion of the volcanoes because most of the volcano is underwater. Indeed, some of the oldest volcanoes are completely submerged, like the Carnegie Ridge, a submerged mountain range stretching east from the Galápagos half way to the mainland. It includes the remnants of some previous volcanic islands that are possibly nine million years old. They are completely eroded and now lie about 600m (2000 ft) beneath the ocean's surface.

Most of the volcanoes in the Galápagos are gently rounded "shield" volcanoes, rather than the more familiar cone-shaped variety found elsewhere. This is due to the fact that the volcanic rock forming the archipelago is mostly basalt, a more fluid magma than that which forms other types of volcanic rock.

When an eruption occurs, the molten basalt disgorges in a lava flow rather than in an explosive blast that discharges cinder and ash to form a cone-shaped volcano.



The dome shell tortoise is the larger of the two species of tortoises found in the Galápagos. © 2013

History

The Bishop of Panama, Fray Tomas de Berlanga, accidentally discovered the Galápagos archipelago on March 10, 1535 when his vessel drifted off course on its way from Panama to Peru. His report to King Charles V of Spain included descriptions of iguanas, sea lions, ‘silly birds’ (probably blue-footed boobies) and the giant tortoise (Galápagos), for which the islands are thought to have been named. Then, in 1536, a Flemish cartographer named, Ortelius, named the archipelago *Isolas de Galápagos*, so the name Galápagos might also have come from the Spanish word for “saddle,” perhaps referring to the shape

of the shell of the “saddleback” tortoise. Some historians believe that Indian inhabitants of South America possibly knew of the islands' existence before 1535, and Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl discovered what he thought were pre-Columbian pottery shards on the islands in 1953, lending credence to this theory, but there are no definite records and the evidence remains inconclusive.

For more than three hundred years after the discovery of the archipelago, a succession of pirates, adventurers and whalers used the Galápagos as a base. Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, was among the whalers who stopped there. The islands provided sheltered anchorage, firewood, water and an abundance of fresh food thanks to the giant tortoises. These animals can survive for a year or more without food or water, providing sailors with fresh meat for their long journeys. The tortoises were caught by the thousands and stacked, alive, in ships' holds.



Visiting the Galapagos is a bit like stepping back in time. © 2013

Adventurers made the first rough charts of the archipelago by the late 1600's, and scientific exploration began in the late 18th century. Charles Darwin, possibly the Galápagos' most famous visitor, dropped anchor from his ship, the Beagle, in 1835. Based on the notes and wildlife collections made during his five-week stay, he developed his theory of evolution and his explanation of the origin of the species. His works spawned the creation–evolution controversy, a recurring dispute about the origins of the Earth, humanity, life, and the universe. Scientists and theologians have written eloquently about their awe and wonder at the history of the universe and of life on this planet. According to a 2012 Gallup survey, the most common belief seems to be that the species have evolved with God's guidance.

Ecuador officially claimed the Galápagos Archipelago in 1832. For roughly a century thereafter, only a few hardy settlers took up residence. The islands were also used as penal colonies, the last of which closed in 1959.

Early in the 20th century, scientists and others started to understand the importance of this unique environment and in 1934 some islands were declared wildlife sanctuaries. Another major step toward preserving the pristine locale came in 1959, when 97% of the land area was made a National Park. The remaining 3% consists of inhabited towns and farm lands. Twenty years later, in 1979, UNESCO declared the Galápagos a World Heritage Site, and in 1986 the Galápagos Marine Resources Reserve was established to include protection of the waters around the archipelago. The islands were also declared a Whale Sanctuary in 1990.



Naturalist guides provide a wealth of information. © 2013

Ecuador enacted the Special Law for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Galápagos Province in 1998. It prohibited further settlement on the islands, put controls on tourism and fishing, and discouraged introduction of foreign plant and animal species. Non-native species, some of them introduced by accident over the centuries, threatened the survival of native Galápagos wildlife by competing for food, destroying essential habitats, overgrazing, and actually feeding on eggs, hatchlings, and young, defenseless animals. Unfortunately, it is still very difficult to enforce this law because of limited resources for patrolling the waters and conflicting interests among the various sectors such as tourism and fishing. Moreover, the main players who make and enforce the rules are constantly changing, which affects both the area of focus and the amount of commitment.



A sea lion takes a well-deserved rest after a hard day spent entertaining tourists. © 2013

Organized tourism to the Galápagos began in the late 1960s. The first live-aboard yacht, with accommodations for up to fifty-eight passengers, began cruising in 1970. A master plan for tourism written in 1974 initially allowed a yearly maximum of 12,000 tourists. The number increased to 60,000 in 1990. The actual numbers of visitors were closer to 17,500 in 1980 and more than 60,000 in 1997. By 2002 there were over 100 yachts and ships offering cruises, and it was estimated that a minimum of 76,000 travelers visited the Park at that time. Discussions have been constantly underway to implement evolving master plans to preserve the precious resources of the Galapagos National Park and Marine Reserve. In 2011, the park director of the Galapagos Islands reported that there were over 173,000 visitors in 2010, a 6% increase over the previous year. Of these, 61,574 were Ecuadorian, 46,093 were from the United States and 9,045 were from the United Kingdom. Roughly 75% of non-Ecuadorian visitors stayed on live-aboard vessels. The numbers compiled by

the park are monitored in three ways: 1. Visitor information cards (reporting general information including age and nationality), 2. Reports by ships on the number of tourists carried per trip, and 3. Reports from the guides (stating number of tourists aboard, duration of trip and sites visited).

Galapagos Island Tourist Visitor Statistics

Number of Visitors per year (1980 to 2010):

YEAR	FOREIGNERS	NATIONALS	TOTAL
1980	13,465	3,980	17,445
1985	11,561	6,279	17,840
1990	25,643	15,549	41,192
1995	40,303	15,483	55,786
2000	54,295	14,561	68,856
2005	86,110	35,584	121,694
2010	111,722	61,574	173,296

Climate

There are basically two seasons in the Galápagos. The dry, *garua* season runs from late June to December, when it is relatively cool and dry with more overcast skies and occasional drizzle or mist (*garua*) during the day. August is the coolest month. During this dry season, the water temperature is lower, fog and mist may hang on the higher elevations, the sea is generally rougher, and the visibility in the ocean is less due to plankton blooms. But this combination of conditions brings the breeding period for many sea birds and shorebirds, marine iguanas, sea lions and fur seals.

Late December to June is considered the hot or wet season, with March and April usually the hottest, wettest months. Around December, the trade winds

fall and the climatic equator (located north of the geographic equator) shifts south toward the Galápagos, causing the westward-flowing current to slow, reducing the upwelling and allowing warmer water from the Panama Current to invade the region. Rain clouds form when the inversion layer breaks down, and the air warms and rises, resulting in daily afternoon showers. Even in this season; however, the low elevations receive only limited rain. Some visitors prefer this time for snorkeling because the water is warmer, clearer, and calmer. Also, the islands turn green, the arid lowlands bloom, and land birds and land reptiles start to breed.



Swallowtail gulls mating © 2006

The Galapagos Islands are a great destination year round. There really is no "off season." However, the high seasons for tourism tend to be mid-December to January and June to August. This is not because Galapagos is "better" this time of year but rather is mainly due to families planning vacations around school calendar vacation periods. Thanks to the confluence of cold-water

currents from the west and the south, the archipelago has an uncharacteristically dry and moderate climate for the tropics and is generally classified as sub-tropical. Daytime temperatures typically average 30°C (86°F) but, in most areas, the surprisingly cold average water temperature varies from 18-25°C (65-77°F) depending on the location and the time of year. In some areas, such as the west coast of Isabela, water temperatures can drop to a frigid 13-17°C (56-63°F).



A sea lion takes a dip in his pool to cool off during the hot season. © 2013

The cold-water currents coming from the south and southeast include the Peruvian Oceanic Current and the Peruvian Coastal Current, known as the Humboldt Current. They bathe the southern and central islands in cold water averaging 18°C (64°F). The Cromwell Current is a deep-water current flowing eastward under the South Equatorial Current, which flows to the west. It brings nutrient-rich water averaging 15°C (59°F), chilling Fernandina and the west coast of Isabela. Warm water currents, including the Panama Current and the

North Equatorial Current bring tropical waters. Generally, as these currents converge, they form a diagonal line (referred to as the equatorial front) that slices through the Galapagos, roughly from southeast to northwest, causing subtropical conditions on the southwest side of the line and nearly tropical conditions on the northeast side of the line. The overall result is that the water surrounding the far northern islands, Wolf and Darwin, is usually warm, while the water around Fernandina and the west coast of Isabela is very cold (13-17° C/ 56-63° F) and the water near the southern and central islands is usually moderately cold (20-23° C/ 68-74° F).

Seasons are governed by changes in these oceanic currents and trade winds. The prevailing trade winds, from the southeast and the northwest, parallel the equatorial front and meet north of the equator. In the wet season, roughly December through June, the point of convergence is farther south, resulting in warmer waters in the central islands during the wet season. The point of convergence is further north in the dry season, causing cooler waters in the central islands at that time. The Humboldt Current and the Peruvian Oceanic Current are also dominant during the dry *garua* season, bringing cold waters from the Antarctic to the Galapagos, with resultant water temperature in the southern islands averaging (18-20°C/ 64-68°F). The Humboldt Current is strongest in September, causing rougher seas and colder water in the west.



A mixture of “cute” with the harsh realities of life and death in the Galápagos. © 2009

El Nino/ La Nina

El Nino is a disruption of the oceanic and atmospheric systems off the coast of South America that causes unusually warm water temperatures, a shift in the direction of the winds, changes in currents, and significantly increased rains. The increased rainfall leads to destructive flooding in the eastern Pacific, while at the same time causing drought in the western Pacific, all the way to Australia.

El Nino means “the little boy” (The Christ Child in Spanish). Fishermen in Chile and Peru who noticed that the surface temperature of the coastal water tended to warm up in December, around Christmas time, first used the term. It is now used to describe a warming trend over a much wider area, out past Christmas Island and all the way up to California, in the USA. Studies have shown that El Nino can last for periods of eighteen months or more, and that it returns, on average, every five to seven years. La Nina, meaning “little girl,”

refers to the opposite occurrence, a “cold event,” when water on the equator is unusually cold. During a La Nina, there is little rain, and the up-wellings return, bringing with them food for the starving marine life. La Nina tends to follow most, but not all El Nino events.

El Nino is predicted by monitoring changes in water temperature on the surface of the sea, wind conditions, and currents near Ecuador and Peru. Such predictions are essential to determining expected climate variations around the world, from a few months to one year in advance.



A grim reminder of the effects of a severe El Niño. ©2004

In normal conditions, the trade winds blow in a westerly direction across the tropical Pacific, raising the level of the sea and causing its temperature to be several degrees higher in the western Pacific than in the east. Temperatures are cooler off South America due to the upwelling of cold water that is also rich in nutrients and supports the diverse marine ecosystems. The cool water, less than 17°C (63°F) close to the surface, keeps rainfall low, and the land relatively dry.

During El Nino, the trade winds slow in the central and western Pacific causing the warmest water to shift to the east, which in turn results in major changes in atmospheric changes around the globe forcing weather changes throughout the world. When the warm water shifts east, the cold water thermocline layer near South America drops lower, sometimes reaching a depth of close to 150m (500ft). The surface water temperature rises and the supply of colder, nutrient-rich water is cut off. The lack of nutrients causes reproduction at lower levels of the food web to decline, which rapidly affects the higher levels of the food web. In Galapagos waters, hammerheads and other species move into deeper, cooler waters, corals bleach white and giant barnacles die. On land, many seabird species don't breed and populations of marine iguanas are severely reduced. Land animals that feed on plant food do well during El Nino, however. Galapagos giant tortoises grow more than usual because of the abundant vegetation.



Land animals that feed on plants do well during an El Nino because there is plenty of food © 2011

The devastating El Nino of 1982-83 saw almost six times as much rain as normal in the Galapagos and created a wildlife catastrophe. The flightless cormorant population fell 45%; 78% of the Galapagos penguins died; and the waved albatrosses and blue-footed boobies didn't breed. The marine iguanas' food staple – green algae – was replaced by inedible red algae and 70% of these iguanas starved to death on some islands. The heavy rains (which may start three months earlier than usual in some El Nino years) set off an explosion of plant growth that contributed to the spread of introduced species, such as fire ants and rats, which then attacked the endemic animals.



Seabirds, like this swallowtail gull, rely on food from the ocean to survive and are adversely affected by an El Nino event. © 2011

The most recent El Niño event began in the spring months of 1997. Instrumentation placed on Buoys in the Pacific Ocean after the 1982-1983 El Niño began recording abnormally high temperatures off the coast of Peru. By

October 1997 this El Niño had already become the strongest in the 50+ years of accurate data gathering.

People and Language

Many people don't realize that there are five inhabited islands. Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Isabela, Floreana, and Baltra have communities in small towns and a choice of restaurants, hotels cafes, shops and other services. Floreana has a very small community and two small inns. Baltra, controlled by the government because of the airport and naval base, has a group of residents, all involved with these facilities. The majority of the present-day inhabitants moved to the islands from the Ecuadorian mainland since the 1950's. Because the population was increasing so rapidly (300-400% between 1980 and 1995), the government had to do something to curb it. While the official population count was 17,000 in early 2003, the actual number was probably higher (possibly up to 25,000) and growing, having tripled since the early 1980's. Legally, only official residents can work in the islands, where the major occupations are tourism, fishing and farming. The Ecuadorian National Census of 2010 reported the Galápagos population at 25,124. Three quarters of which migrated from outside of the archipelago.



Fast Speedboats provide daily, scheduled ferry service between the islands. © 2013

About two thirds of the Galápaguenos live in Puerto Ayora, the largest town in the islands, and in the surrounding areas on Santa Cruz Island. Numerous live-aboard yachts and day boat operations are based in either Puerto Ayora, on Santa Cruz, or the provincial capital, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, on San Cristóbal. The main airports are on Baltra, separated from Santa Cruz by a narrow strait, and on San Cristóbal.

There is now daily inter-island transportation between population centers. Many of the uninhabited islands can be visited on day tours. Currently the majority of non-Ecuadorian tourists choose live-aboard yachts of various sizes for multi-day cruises that reach the more distant islands.

The official language in the Galapagos is Spanish, as it is in the rest of Ecuador. Most residents involved in the tourism industry speak very good-to-excellent English. The top-level guides are multilingual, but many of the other crewmembers on the yachts speak only Spanish. Nevertheless, they are very

friendly and go out of their way to help, so that the universal language, compassion, overcomes most barriers to communication.



Aerogal is one of the domestic carriers that bring tourists to the Galápagos. © 2013

Chapter Two

Travel Basics

This chapter provides the detailed, practical information that is useful to anyone planning a trip to the Galápagos Islands. As a general rule, changes in the Galápagos can occur daily and there is often no way to predict them until they happen. There are always rumors, many of which turn out to be true, but some of which turn out to be untrue. National government elections can bring in a leader with a different agenda. The Director of the Galápagos National Park and the Galápagos Marine Reserve can be replaced unexpectedly, leaving projected programs up in the air or changing existing rules and regulations. And it is anyone's guess when an airline will stop or start flying. Everyone

familiar with the Galápagos knows that what is true today may not be true tomorrow, and they must keep their feelers out at all times to be ready to adapt as modifications occur. Likewise, visitors must always be aware of the real possibility of last minute changes. They should not make assumptions that everything will go as planned, and they must be adaptable. Nevertheless, everything usually gets resolved in the end and the Galapagos is one of the most fascinating places on earth. Everyone who visits wants to return.

Tourists visit the Galápagos for a variety of reasons, including: diving, birding, general nature hikes, photography, and scientific research. Most tourists opt for one of three basic kinds of tours: Day trips returning to the same hotel each night, hotel-based trips staying in lodgings on different islands, and live-aboard yachts/ships. Because of recent Park Rules and restrictions, there is a great deal more emphasis on land-based tours, however to get the most out of your time in Galapagos, I would recommend a yacht/ship based trip. An exception is the new Pikaia Lodge, which is a hybrid operation offering a high end hotel on Santa Cruz Island and its own 'day use' yacht.

When planning a trip to Galapagos, many people will use the services of an experienced travel company that truly understands Galapagos rather than attempting to book their trip on their own. Many companies will claim to be experts in Galapagos when in reality they have little experience with the destination and no established connections in Ecuador. A few simple questions can usually help you differentiate between companies that really know what they are doing from those that don't. The services of these companies are free to their clients as they are all paid a commission from the various operators in Galapagos. They can provide you with relatively unbiased, knowledgeable information on the various operations and steer you clear of the less reputable operations. Booking through one of these experienced travel companies will insure that you get the most out of your trip without costing you any additional money. These companies specialize in organizing Galapagos tours and they remain vigilant in keeping current with all of the changes as they occur. Most

do an excellent job of keeping their clients informed and they work both directly with individuals and with photo experts, universities, and other group operators who wish to conduct tours. The company I recommend is Galapagos Adventures. They have been organizing tours to Galapagos for over 20 years, so they are very familiar with all aspects of Galapagos travel. Visit their website at (www.galapagosadventures.com), call toll free from the US/Canada 866 626-8272 or email info@Galapagosadventures.com . Mention this eBook on your first inquiry and receive \$50 off per person for any complete Galapagos tour of 3 or more nights. Contact Galapagos Adventures for details and restrictions.

Some people prefer to book their tours on their own. For these travelers, I have included a short list of companies that I can recommend from personal experience and that I know offer outstanding service.



Ecoventura's live-aboard yacht M/Y Eric

If you want to book a trip on a live-aboard yacht, I highly recommend the company Ecoventura, which operates a fleet of three identical 20-passenger superior first-class ships; the M/Y Eric, the M/Y Flamingo I & the M/Y Letty. These yachts feature guided land excursions with hand-picked expert naturalist

guides, in groups limited to no more than 10 people per guide as opposed to the typical ratio of 16 people per guide. This smaller group size allows for more intimate encounters with the wildlife. A typical trip departs every Sunday from Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal Island, and offers two different week-long itineraries that alternate each week. Ecoventura is currently building the first of three super luxury yachts to be named the M/Y Origin, which is due to begin operations in 2016. They also own/operate the Galapagos Sky, a 16 passenger yacht offering dive trips. For more information about any of these yachts, visit their website <http://www.ecoventura.com/> , call (800)633-7972 or email info@galapagosnetwork.com



Pikaia Lodge offers day cruises on their private yacht

For those tourists traveling to the Galápagos, who are looking for a luxury trip and want to stay in a hotel, I would recommend the newly opened Pikaia Lodge, which offers an alternative to traditional cruises. It is a modern facility

located in a secluded giant tortoise reserve outside of Puerto Ayora on the Island of Santa Cruz, where clients enjoy the comforts of a luxurious hotel combined with daily excursions to explore various sites within the Galápagos National Park. Clients are treated to day cruises onboard the large private Yacht Pikaia I, which offers private cabins where guests can relax and freshen up between land visits, returning to the lodge in the late afternoon. Although the lodge is brand new, the management has been involved in luxury Galápagos tours for many years operating the luxury live-aboard dive yachts, The Galápagos Aggressors.

You can find out more on their website at: <http://www.pikaialodge.com/>

Getting There

To get to the Galápagos, you must take a flight to either of Ecuador's two international airports, located at Quito and Guayaquil.

From the USA , there are direct/nonstop flights to Quito or Guayaquil from New York, Houston, Atlanta and Miami. American Airlines (US Tel 1-800-433-7300, www.aa.com), United Airlines (US Tel 1-800-864-8331; www.united.com) and Delta Airlines (US Tel 800.221.1212; www.delta.com) are the main US carriers. Aerogal and Lan are now competing with new flights from Miami. There are also some Latin American carriers, including Copa and LACSA. Taca also offers flights from various US gateway cities, with stops in Panama and Costa Rica. The flight time to Ecuador is about four hours from Miami and five hours from Houston and Atlanta. It should be noted that several of the regional airlines, including Aerogal, Taca, and LACSA, have merged with Avianca, although Aerogal is still operating under its original name.

From Canada , most flights connect through US gateway cities. Air Canada (Tel. 1-888-247-2262; www.aircanada.com) and American Airlines (US Tel 1-800-433-7300, www.aa.com) fly from Toronto and Montreal, via New York and Miami.

From Europe only KLM (www.klm.com) and Iberia Airlines (www.iberia.com) have direct flights. KLM flies their own planes from Amsterdam to Ecuador and Iberia flies from Madrid to Ecuador.

Entry into Ecuador

Upon arrival in Ecuador, everyone must go through customs and immigration. Visitors must have a valid passport good for at least six months after their visit. You will be given copies of your entry documents that must be turned in on departure from the country, so be sure to keep them in a safe place (preferably with your passport). At the time of writing, no visas are required regardless of your nationality as long as you are entering Ecuador as a tourist and plan to stay for less than 90 days. However this could change at any time so it is best to check with your consulate before traveling. The airline that you are using for your international flight into Ecuador will also know whether or not you will need a visa. Make copies of all important documents (passport, air tickets, prescription medications, etc.). If they are lost, replacement will be much easier with copies in hand.

An Overnight on the Mainland

Because most flights arrive in Ecuador in the evening, visitors usually have to stay in Quito or Guayaquil for at least one overnight before continuing on to the Galapagos. There are lots of high quality hotels in both Quito and Guayaquil. Besides the large standard hotels in both Quito and Guayaquil there are also a number of smaller family operated lodgings. Although these hotels typically lack some the amenities of the larger hotels, they often more than make up for this with a much higher degree of cultural and personal experience. Often times the owners will greet you in person and this enables you to meet and get to know “real Ecuadorians” – very atypical in most of the larger hotels.

As a general rule, I fly into Guayaquil, unless I am going to take a tour of the City of Quito or the interior of Ecuador in the vicinity of Quito. There is a brand new international airport in Quito, which is located outside the city. This can make for long airport transfers, but there are many interesting things to see and do in Quito making a visit worthwhile if you have additional time. You can take a tour of Quito's incredibly beautiful churches, shop at the world famous Otavalo Market, hike a volcano, visit a cloud forest, go whitewater rafting, travel to the Amazon region, and/or visit the equator line where you can see scientific experiments that can only be performed on the Equator.

The majority of companies operating tours in the Galápagos and many of the mainland hotels will arrange for transfers between the airport and hotels on the mainland for their clients, making it extremely convenient after a day of travel. Check with the agency that booked your tour or your hotel to find out whether there is an additional charge for this service.

If you are part of a group, look for the person meeting your group after you get through customs since baggage handling to the hotel has probably been pre-arranged. Push carts for luggage cost \$2.00 US each. In the past, there were signs in the airports discouraging paying gratuities to porters, but if you need additional assistance with luggage, porters are eager to help. They used to receive about \$1.00 US per bag. For solo travelers, the operators can also arrange to have someone meet you at the airport and accompany you to the hotel, but that will cost you a bit more. Don't forget that some of the major hotels on the mainland provide free shuttle bus service to and from the airport, so check on that possibility if transfers are not otherwise included in your trip package.



The Macaw Hostel, located near the airport, is a great place to stay in Guayaquil © 2013

If you are traveling independently or in a small group and routing through Guayaquil, consider staying at the Macaw Hostel, a small, charming hotel situated only 10 minutes from the Guayaquil airport, operated by a delightful couple Rodrigo Sangolqui and Fanny Paltan: www.hostalmacaw.com . They also run Galanet, a Tour Operator and Travel Agency. I have used their services many times to handle airport transfers, baggage and logistics to insure that all aspects of travel go smoothly. Check out their reviews and services on Trip Advisor.com.



Lobby of the Oro Verde Hotel in Guayaquil

If you are looking to experience the Authentic Ecuadorian Hospitality, I would recommend the Oro Verde Hotel, located in the heart of the tourist area of Guayaquil. I have stayed there many times, before and after my visits to the Galápagos, and I have never been disappointed with the service, the food and the amenities. It not only offers high quality “standard rooms”, but also “Exclusive Club Floor Suites” with personalized services, secretarial assistance and a private lounge with complementary food and beverages. The suites are ideal for families and travelers seeking more space, comfort and privacy. The hotel also has a very nice pool and several good restaurants. A tasty and filling breakfast is usually included in the price of the rooms. For more information or to make a reservation, go to www.oroverdeguayaquil.com .

Getting To the Galapagos from Mainland Ecuador

Most domestic flights to Galapagos originate in Quito and fly to the archipelago with a stop in Guayaquil. In rare cases, it might be necessary to

change planes, but usually you simply remain on board while the passengers who originate their tour in Guayaquil board the aircraft. The international flights to Ecuador and domestic flights from the Ecuadorian mainland to the Galapagos are generally billed separately.



Aerogal offers new planes and flights to Baltra or San Cristobal. © 2013

There are two airports in the Galapagos, one on Baltra (also known as AeroPuerto Seymour), located on a small island off the north coast of Santa Cruz, and the other in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal. It is **EXTREMELY IMPORTANT** that you fly to the correct airport and arrive at the correct time. This is why you should always purchase your domestic airline ticket through the yacht that is holding your reservation via the company that assisted you in booking your tour. They know the correct flights that match your tour and they are holding confirmed seats on those flights for their passengers. Booking your airline ticket elsewhere could result in you flying to the wrong airport, arriving at the wrong time or even being listed as a “standby passenger”. Potentially any of these mistakes could result in you missing your entire tour. Your agent or tour operator can arrange this booking for you.

The new terminal on Baltra Island officially opened in February of 2013. It uses solar energy, water reuse and passive cooling, making it the first LEED's certified green air terminal on the planet.



Passengers meet outside the new all green Baltra Airport and wait for the crew to sort and load baggage. © 2013

Air service, carriers and itineraries are subject to change (sometimes with little notice), so be sure to ask for frequent updates before you travel.

TAME (which is operated by the Ecuadorian Air Force; In Quito Tel. 2-397-7100/ In Guayaquil Tel. 4-231-0305), **Aerogal** (In Quito Tel. 2-294-2800; In Guayaquil Tel. 4-231-0346), and **LAN** (Tel. 800-735-5526) all offer round trip tickets to Baltra and San Cristobal.

The flight from Guayaquil takes about an hour and a half. Round trip tickets to the Galápagos from mainland Ecuador are approximately \$500 USD with the flights from Quito being slightly more expensive than the flights from Guayaquil. The prices also can fluctuate depending on the time of year.

Tour companies generally arrange for a representative to meet Galápagos-bound passengers at the domestic airport on the mainland on the morning of departure, where they assist with baggage check-in, obtain boarding passes and seat assignments, and help sort out any problems. When a group is traveling together, the members can sometimes, but not always, check all of the luggage at once. This often helps save on the potential of hefty overweight/excessive baggage fees.

It is a good idea to carry-on all essential camera gear, accessories, medications, and anything else that cannot be easily replaced if a piece of luggage gets lost. Upon arrival in the Galápagos, baggage is thoroughly inspected by Galápagos National Park personnel to reduce the threat from any additional non-endemic species (plants, seeds, or animals) that might be carried into the islands.

The return process is pretty much the same as on arrival. When checking in for the return flight, the guide can sometimes but not always check everyone in as a group, which can help avoid the potential of overweight baggage fees.

Baggage Allowance

The baggage limits on most international flights are one checked bag weighing 23kg (50lbs) or less and two carry-ons, including a personal item such as a computer bag, backpack, or purse. It is not unusual for international carriers to charge you for a second checked bag and some carriers have been known to flatly refuse a third bag. Overweight penalty charges differ from airline to airline. Be sure to check current policies ahead of time with the airline.

Domestic flights within Ecuador are also restrictive. At this time, Aerogal, the largest domestic airline flying into the Galápagos, allows only one checked bag weighing up to 50 lbs. (23 kg) and up to 62" (158 cm) and one carry-on bag up to 22 lbs. (10 kg) and up to 45" (115 cm) per passenger free of charge. After this limit is exceeded they charge an additional \$10 +12% tax for bags

weighing between 50-70 lbs (23-32 kg), \$20 + 12% tax for bags weighing between 70-99 lbs (32-45 kg). If the bag is oversized then the fee is \$50 + 12% tax for bags 63-85" (159-215 cm).

Should you wish to check a second bag, please keep in mind that additional bags are checked subject to space availability which typically is not a problem. The fees are \$20 + 12% tax for bags weighing up to 50 lbs (23 kg), \$30 + 12% tax for bags weighing between 51-70 lbs (23-32 kg), \$40 + 12% tax for bags weighing between 70-99 lbs (32-45 kg). If you do get hit with an overweight charge, consider it as part of the cost of your trip and you won't get stressed over it!



The new green Airport on Baltra features solar and wind power. © 2013

Fees and Taxes

The current **Galápagos National Park fee** is \$100 USD per person and it must be paid in cash upon arrival at the airport in the archipelago. Children

under 12 are given a 50% discount. Some but not all yachts will give you the option of prepaying this fee and whenever possible this is recommended.

A system was implemented by the Galapagos National Institute (**INGALA**), which has been succeeded by the Governing Counsel of the Galápagos (**Consejo de Gobierno de Galápagos**), as an additional measure to control the migration to the Galapagos Archipelago as per the Special Law for Galapagos aimed toward a sustainable human development and the conservation of the Galapagos ecosystems. This system requires that all passengers who are flying to Galapagos must now have a transit control card. Therefore all persons traveling to the Galapagos Islands must first obtain a card. Counters have been installed at the airports of Quito and Guayaquil to issue the Transit Control Cards at a cost of 10 US\$ per person in cash. Some yachts/ships offer their passengers the opportunity to pre-purchase this. If you are given this opportunity – take it. It will save you time and headaches at the airport. You will receive a small **Transit control card**. Keep this document somewhere where you can find it. You will be asked for it when you depart Galapagos.



Visitors check through immigration, pay their Park entrance fee and then move on to pick up their bags (Baltra). ©2013

Getting Around in Galapagos

Upon arrival into **Galapagos**, tour participants who will be on a yacht or ship will be met by representatives from their vessel (usually the guides) and are then transferred to their vessel. Individuals or groups scheduled to stay at a hotel in Galapagos may or may not have a representative at the airport to assist them depending on what has been included in the tour. Communicate with the company that booked your tour or the hotel where you made your reservations and ask them how to get from the airport to your hotel. The crew members from your vessel will handle transferring all of your luggage between the airport to the yacht/ship and they are very efficient and careful, but it is still a good idea to carry your documents, personal items and camera/video gear yourself.

If you are arriving at the **Puerto Baquerizo Moreno airport** on San Cristobal, tour participants are met and transferred to the dock by a small bus.

This airport is only a short walk away from the dock, hotels, and services.



Ferries transfer tourists from Baltra across the Itabaca Channel to the north end of Santa Cruz Island. © 2013

If you are arriving at the **Baltra airport**, the yachts and ships are usually moored in the Baltra harbor. Passengers get on a van or free public bus for the five-minute drive to the boat dock. From there a panga (dinghy or small inflatable) will transfer passengers out to their yacht/ship.

Occasionally the yacht will be moored in Puerto Ayora, on the southeast side of Santa Cruz Island. In this case, passengers take the free bus to the ferry landing for a 10-minute ferry ride across the Itabaca Channel to Santa Cruz Island, and then board another bus for a 45-minute drive to Puerto Ayora. The nominal ferry charge of \$.80 USD per person along with the bus fee is usually included in the transfers for groups. The guide that met you at the airport will guide you through this whole process. If you are staying at a hotel in Puerto Ayora the process is the same minus the guide (unless that has been

prearranged). These travelers can take the public bus into town for \$2.50 USD or take a 45-minute taxi ride for about \$15 US. If you get confused, you can always just follow “the locals” as the vast majority of them are heading to Puerto Ayora. If you are uncomfortable with trying to do this on your own, for an additional fee, your agent, tour operator or hotel can arrange to have a guide meet you at Baltra airport and assist you with your transfer.



Air-conditioned buses take tourists from the Baltra Airport to the ferry, which will take them across the Itabaca Channel to the north end of Santa Cruz Island. © 2006

Inter-Island Transportation

There is daily boat service connecting Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz with Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristóbal and Puerto Villamil on Isabela. These services cost \$25 to \$35 per person one way and take about two hours to get to San Cristóbal and 2 1/2 hours to get to Isabela. There is only one

connection per day and the crossings can be a bit rough. The ferries leave Isabella at 6 AM, San Cristobal at 7 AM and depart from Puerto Ayora at 2 PM. Emetebe is an inter-island airline that has an office on Santa Cruz. It has a small fleet of eight-seat aircraft that make the half-hour flight among San Cristóbal, Baltra and Isabela several times per week however luggage is restricted to only one small bag.

Health and Safety

General

There is no current risk of malaria in the Galapagos and at the time of writing no other immunizations are required for travel on the mainland UNLESS you plan to visit the rain forests. In this case, prevention against malaria is recommended and yellow fever vaccination is required.



There is a Hospital in Puerto Ayora, which can handle most minor illnesses. © 2013

Medical services in the islands are minimal and visitors to the Galapagos should take certain precautions, just as they would almost anywhere they travel. Do not drink tap water. Avoid ice in beverages, except on board luxury yachts/ships and in the main hotels and restaurants. If there is a question, ask whether ice is made from purified or bottled water, and inquire about the water itself. To be on the safe side, just stick to bottled water or soft drinks. Try to avoid eating raw vegetables, salads, and any raw foods while traveling on the continent (one exception is fruit that you peel). Again, there should be no problem with anything served on most live-aboard yachts and ships and in most hotels in the Galápagos.

Because the sun is extremely strong and air temperatures hot, it is most important to avoid dehydration by drinking plenty of water all day long. Use a hat with a wide brim and keep re-applying sunblock all day to prevent heatstroke and sunburn, either of which will certainly interfere with your enjoyment of the trip.

The hospital (in Puerto Ayora) is not very sophisticated and is poorly supplied. Most people who develop serious illnesses fly to the mainland for medical care. However, a local doctor will see visitors for minor maladies, and there are several pharmacies in town. Most prescription drugs don't require a written prescription, but the name may be different in Spanish, so bring the chemical name. For the most part, pharmacy personnel speak Spanish only. If you need medical services, ask your guide or hotel to arrange for them and accompany you.

Vaccinations to Consider

Hepatitis A : This is a viral infection of the liver and is contracted mainly from contaminated food and water. The vaccination is strongly recommended, and a booster after 6 or 12 months guarantees protection for over 10 years. Get the first shot before you leave on the trip; it's possible to get a follow-up shot from a good private clinic in Ecuador.

Typhoid fever : This dangerous gut infection is also acquired from food and water. The vaccination is strongly recommended and can be administered as a live oral vaccine or through two injections taken at least four weeks apart.

Yellow fever : This vaccination is necessary when entering Ecuador from Peru and Columbia (both officially infected countries), but it's a good idea in any case because it's a dangerous disease.

Hepatitis B : This is a less-common travelers' disease because it's contracted through sexual contact or exposure to infected blood. The vaccination is recommended for longer term travel (more than six months) and if you are likely to come into close contact with locals (for example working in medicine).

Time

The Ecuadorian mainland is five hours behind Greenwich Mean Time, and the Galápagos are six hours behind, one hour behind Ecuador's continental time, so keep that in mind when figuring out airplane connections. A few day yachts operate on mainland time to simplify contact with their offices. Ecuadorian time is in the same time zone as the Eastern Standard Time Zone of the United States. Daylight savings time is not observed.

Money

The US dollar was made legal tender in Ecuador as of March 2000. Most places accept US dollars, traveler's checks and credit cards (Visa, MasterCard and American Express), but some merchants add a 6-8% surcharge for credit card use. U.S. dollars (cash in small bills) are the best medium of exchange and there are still many smaller hotels, stores, and restaurants in the Galápagos that only accept cash. Ecuadorian ATMs increasingly accept foreign credit and debit cards. Banks and Casas de Cambio (currency exchanges) are the best places to change money if necessary. There is a Banco del Pacifico office in

Puerto Ayora and one in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, but Puerto Villamil has no bank or ATM.



You will need \$100 US in cash to pay the Park Fee when you enter the Galápagos through immigration. © 2013

Tour guides, porters and other tourist industry workers expect a tip, but taxi drivers do not. Higher end restaurants may add 12% tax and a 10% service charge to their bills, while less expensive restaurants usually do not, but check your bill to find out. Except on the yachts and ships, tips should be handed directly to the person you are rewarding for their service.



Not too many of the local residents speak English. © 2011

All yachts and ships will suggest a standard gratuity and recommend that it be put in an envelope for the captain to distribute to the entire crew (including the captain), according to rank. Many passengers are still in a quandary about the amount to tip when the time comes to settle their bill, so remember that it is only a suggested figure and, in the final analysis, it is up to the individual and the quality of service provided.

Because the archipelago is so remote and transportation costs for all goods are relatively high, most prices are not negotiable. You can try asking for a *descent* (discount), which is sometimes available in tourist places, but not likely in the Galápagos. Bargaining is only accepted, and expected, at craft markets on the mainland. However, there is no harm in asking.

Ecuador has a two-tier pricing system in effect and foreigners pay a lot more for certain services (mainly transportation and hotels) than locals do.

Business Hours

Banks are open from 9 AM to 1:30 PM weekdays. Most businesses are open from about 9AM to 6PM (some take a siesta from 1PM to 3 or 4PM), and restaurants tend to close by 10PM.

Communications

The country code for Ecuador is 593 and the area code for the archipelago is 05 (drop the zero when calling from abroad). Hotels may require additional dialing prefixes, so ask the operator at the hotel for assistance. PacificTel has an office in Puerto Ayora and in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. Puerto Ayora and Puerto Baquerizo Moreno have several Internet cafés. The cost is nominal, but one may have better (faster) connections than another. Ask a local which one she or he likes. Some hotels allow guests to use their Internet service with no charge.

Electricity

The standard electrical system on land and on yachts is 110V; 60Hz. Outlets take two flat-pronged plugs, same as in the USA. Visitors with other appliances should bring adapters and converters appropriate for their own country.

Measurements

Metric weights and measurements are generally used in the Galapagos, but the imperial system is also understood.

Converting Metric to Imperial

To convert °C to °F, multiply by 1.8 and add 32 (30°C = 86°F)

To convert °F to °C, subtract 32 and divide by 1.8 (85°F = 29°C)

To convert bar to PSI, multiply by 14.5 (200 bar = 2900psi, 50 bar = 725psi)

To convert PSI to bar, divide by 14.5 (3000psi=207bar, 500psi=34.5bar)

1 cm = 0.39 inches

1 inch = 2.54 cm

1 m = 3.28 ft

1 ft = 0.30 m

1 km = .62 mi or .54 naut. mi

1 mi = 1.61 km

1 lb = 0.45 kg

1 kg = 2.2 lb

What to bring

Although the archipelago is on the equator and air temperature is usually warm, breezes on the water can cool the air. In addition to shorts and T-shirts, bring long-sleeve, lightweight shirts, long pants, a light sweater or sweatshirt, and a windbreaker, light jacket or poncho. These also offer protection from the intense sun on land trips, as well as comfort if you don't enjoy air conditioning. Bring footwear that has good support and traction for hiking and landing on slippery rocks, as well as old tennis shoes, booties, or Tevas for wet landings. Don't forget your bathing suits (of course), and an extra-wide-brimmed hat, preferably one that covers the sides as well as the back of your neck. A photographer's vest is very useful. Lifestyle is completely casual on the islands, so you won't need that tuxedo or evening gown.



All visitors should bring a camera or video camcorder to capture some of the amazing things they will see! © 2011

Lightweight binoculars are a good idea, and a waterproof “wet-dry bag” will be very useful to keep your camera, towel, and lenses protected from salt spray and water in pangas (open boats) and on “wet” shore landings.



Wet-dry bags are a good way to protect your camera from the elements when you are in the panga. © 2011

Include high SPF sunscreen, insect repellent (high DEET), mosquito coils if you are planning to stay in a less expensive accommodation, and a basic first aid kit (anti-motion and anti-seasickness pills, anti-diarrhea pills, anti-fungal cream, antibiotic ointment, an all-purpose doctor-prescribed oral antibiotic, any prescription medications that you normally take and other medications such as antihistamines (both oral and topical) and anti-allergy products needed for individual conditions). An Epi-pen for anaphylactic shock can be a lifesaver if you are prone to allergic reactions from bites or stings. Liquid Band-aid is a great, inexpensive product that protects cuts and blisters and does not come off in the water like regular Band-Aids do. It's a good idea to bring an extra supply of any prescription drugs and keep them in a separate place. These suggestions can be adjusted for individual needs.

Where to Stay in Galapagos

Hotels in Galapagos range from cheap and basic to first-class luxury. Prices tend to increase during the heaviest tourism seasons (December to January and June to August). Lodging is available on Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Floreana, and Isabella, mainly in small family-run hotels or inns. Some are inexpensive and provide a minimum of amenities. Others are luxurious and have all of the amenities you would find in any first class hotel anywhere in the world.



A sea lion provides some interesting entertainment. © 2013



An upstairs restaurant in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno offers beautiful views of the harbor. © 2013

Dining

Restaurants and bars are limited on the islands, but it seems that no one is ever rushed (i.e. service is leisurely). The dining establishments are not air-conditioned, but they have an excellent selection of meals, including seafood, meat and Italian dishes. Puerto Ayora boasts a number of very good restaurants.



There is a wide variety of jewelry and artwork for sale in Puerto Ayora. © 2013

Shopping

Typical souvenirs are for sale in many shops and small kiosks, as well as at the Charles Darwin Research Station, where profits from the items sold go to support this worthwhile institution. Local pottery, books, wood-carvings, tie-dyed and batik clothing, hand-painted T-shirts, fine jewelry, maps, and artist supplies are some of the items available to tempt tourist dollars from their purses. Tui de Roy, a New Zealand resident who grew up in the Galápagos, is famous for her all inspiring photography. Some of her photos sell as postcards and illustrate beautiful books on the islands and their wildlife. A few stores offer items for more serious shoppers including beautiful jewelry, woven tapestries, paintings, pottery, artwork and woodcarvings. Many of these stores can be found along Avenida Darwin in Puerto Ayora.



Snorkeling with a penguin off Bartolomé. © 2013

Chapter Three

Naturalist Tours, Snorkeling and Visitation Information

There are basically two ways to visit the Galápagos Islands: on a live-aboard cruise or in a land-based hotel. The Galápagos Islands are comprised of 16 volcanic islands and many rocky islets, scattered over 60,000 square kilometers in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The Naturalist tour sites are sprinkled throughout this entire area.

Land-Based Tours

An ever-growing number of tourists are deciding to visit Galapagos on a land-based tour. There are basically two kinds of these tours; one where you

stay in the same hotel each night and do day trips to different islands returning to your hotel at the end of each day and “island hopping” tours where you stay in lodgings on different islands using a small boat to transfer you between islands. Although you will not see as much of Galapagos on these kinds of tours they are often less expensive than the live aboard trips and can usually begin on any day of your choosing.

Land based tours restrict you to visiting sites that are within a day’s travel by small boat from one of the three population centers: Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal and Villamil on Isabela. Of course, you could combine two or more overnight stays in each of these population centers to increase your area of coverage and the number of sites you would have access to. There is ferry service by small speedboats between the islands.



Waved albatross can only be found on Espanola Island on the Southern itinerary, which is accessible only if you are on a live-aboard cruise. © 2006

However, many of the unpopulated islands, such as Genovesa, Espanola, Santa Fe, Santiago, and Fernandina, are off-limits to the land based operations. The Galapagos National Park has passed a rigid set of regulations regarding who may visit the various land tour sites. Many of the Naturalist tour sites are only accessible to tourists who elect to book their trip on a cruise ship/yacht.

While some budget-minded tourists have elected to stay on land, there are disadvantages in doing so. You will waste a lot of time traveling back and forth between your hotel and the sites every day. You will also be spending a great deal of time schlepping your luggage and taking a potential pounding on the long ferry rides between the islands. While this may add to the adventure for some, the biggest disadvantage is that you will be precluded from visiting many of the very best land tours in the Galápagos and you will be able to see far less during the same period of time.



Many of the best sites are difficult to get to by land-based operations. © 2009

Live-Aboard Cruises

The majority of foreign visitors to the Galápagos choose a live-aboard yacht or ship for their tour for a number of important reasons.

- Once the list of naturalist land tour sites is established, an itinerary is set up to minimize travel time. The cruise ship moves from site to site, rather than returning to the starting point after each site is visited, as you would have had to if you stayed at a land-based hotel. For the most part, yachts travel between the islands at night. This saves time and increases the number of potential visits/activities during the day.
- Live-aboards are much more comfortable than the small boats used for inter-island travel as is the case with the “island hopping tours” and transportation to Naturalist sites from land-based hotels.
- Live-aboards visit some of the more remote areas in the Galápagos that are only accessible by live-aboard yachts/ships. If you stay in a hotel in Puerto Ayora, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, or Villamil (on Isabela) you will be restricted to day tours that are situated close to these population centers. In addition, Live-aboard cruises are allowed to visit some islands that are off limits to land-based tours.



Galápagos' penguins are only found in unpopulated areas including Bartolomé, Fernandina and the west coast of Isabela. © 2011

Naturalist yachts are categorized into 5 classes - economy, tourist class, tourist class superior, first class, and luxury. However, these distinctions can be misleading because the class is determined by the owner of the yacht and a good tourist class superior yacht might be run better than a more expensive luxury class one. Selecting the right live-aboard is very important. This is where the assistance of an experienced Galapagos tour operator can be invaluable. It is really essential to get accurate, current information about the choices available.

The price of the trip will include food, accommodations, transfers to and from the boat, trained naturalist guides and the land tours. Alcoholic drinks, tips, airfare and Park fees are not included in the price of the trips. Single supplements are normally much more expensive than double occupancy.



A sea lion poses on Bahia Gardner. Visitors should sign up for at least an 8 day trip to experience two or more regions of the Galápagos. © 2011

Yacht and Ship Itineraries

Each year on January 31, the Galapagos National Park issues all vessels in Galapagos a patente (permit to operate) with an approved itinerary that the yacht/ship is required to follow. The itinerary indicates which visitation sites that yacht/ship may visit and when. It also lists any other authorized activity the passengers on that vessel can participate in at any given site. This can lead to some confusion because it is possible that one yacht may be authorized to do kayaking at one site while another yacht anchored right next to it is not. Imagine the passengers' dismay when they asked the guide of their yacht if they can go kayaking and the guide replies "kayaking is not authorized for us at this site" all the while kayaks from other yachts are paddling by. Should you be in this situation during your trip, don't worry because tomorrow the tables will probably be turned.



A sea lion relaxes in the shade next to the trail. © 2009

Length of the Trip

Naturalist cruises have itineraries that vary in length from four to fifteen days. Prior to 2012 all the itineraries were 7 nights long but starting in 2012, the GNP issued patentes (permits) to all the vessels that have itineraries that are 14 nights long. This was done to reduce some of the environmental impact on some of the heavily visited sites by allowing each yacht/ship to visit these sites once every 2 weeks instead of once every week. Very few passengers book trips that are 14 nights long so the yachts subdivided their itinerary into shorter cruises, which can be combined together to form longer trips without repeating sites. Some kept it simple and divided the itinerary in half creating two 7 night cruises that follow different itineraries. Other operations divided the 14 nights into trips of 5+5+4 days or 6+4+4 days or 3+4+3+4 days. These shorter cruises can also be combined to form Galapagos trips of 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14 nights. The yachts/ships needed to name these itineraries to differentiate between them thus you now see names such as northern itinerary, western

itinerary, central island itinerary, southern itinerary, etc. associated with a tour description. Since the yachts have fixed itineraries if there a specific island you want to visit, you need to check with your agent, tour operator, or vessel to confirm that the island or site that interests you is included on the itinerary of the tour you are booking.

When planning your trip, keep in mind that in addition to the time you will spend in Galapagos, you will probably also need to add a few days in mainland Ecuador due to international flight connections.



Panga rides can provide some excellent opportunities to photograph birds and other wildlife up close. © 2006

Visitation Site Rules and Tips

General Park rules require that visitors stay on the marked trails at all times, stay together with the guide, and do not touch or disturb the animals. Even so, always look where you are stepping. The animals do not know that the trails

are for humans, so they frequently build their nests or hang out right in the middle of the trails.

Many visitation sites require wet landings on a beach or surf-soaked rocks, and it might be raining or misty on the islands depending on the season, so bring a light poncho and waterproof footwear, with good traction. On some islands, there are panga rides along the cliffs or rocky shorelines. These are excellent opportunities to photograph birds, but can potentially wreak havoc on camera equipment because of salt spray. Some very useful protective items include: the strong and durable, heavy waterproof bags that can be filled with air and hold a camera, media cards, batteries, extra lenses and small towel; the larger, stronger, plastic Ziploc bags; Pelican water-tight cases; waterproof sacs with special closures to keep out water; and smaller housings and 'Ewa-type' marine camera bags that let you keep the camera inside even when shooting photos.

Summary of National Park Rules

- All itineraries must be pre-approved by the National Park
- All vessels may do a maximum of 2 land visits per day - one in the AM and one in the PM.
- Only vessels, which have the proper permits, are allowed to sail the waters of Galapagos.
- Visitors are only allowed in the park under the supervision of a Galapagos National Park guide.
- Guides are allowed to have a maximum of 16 passengers with them at on time.
- Visitors must remain on the marked trail and with a guide at all times when visiting the islands.
- Visitors are not allowed to touch the animals.
- Visitors must not disturb, harass, feed, or interfere with the natural behavior of the animals.

- Visitors are not allowed to collect or remove anything from the islands.
- Food is not permitted on the islands.
- Visitors are not allowed to smoke while on the islands.
- The park closes at sunset.
- Everyone must be off the unpopulated islands by nightfall.
- Do not litter.
- PLEASE Clean your shoes' soles before disembarking in the islands.
You may have carried some seeds endemic to one island and would not want to introduce them to another.

The National Park Rules are constantly in a state of change so it is always best to contact the organization that booked your tour for up to date information.



You never know what you may encounter when snorkeling in the Galápagos. A juvenile booby bird looks for food from the surface. © 2006

Snorkeling

The snorkeling opportunities in the Galápagos are plentiful - both near the shore and in deeper water. When snorkeling you can find an interesting mixture of cold and warm water species that is rarely found anywhere else. Depending on the location it is also possible that you will have the opportunity to snorkel with penguins or sea lions. The various snorkeling sites are discussed in detail in the Chapters about visits to the individual islands. Near-shore snorkeling reveals many colorful tropical fish, sea lions, penguins, marine iguanas, boobies, turtles, and small sharks. Snorkeling in blue water offers the chance to see dolphins, whales, hammerhead sharks, larger turtles, mola molas and rays.

Water Temperature

The "Garua" Season, when there is usually a mist covering the highlands of the islands, runs from late June to December. This is when the water is colder with the coldest water temperature from September to November. In the "warm" season, January to June, there is more rain, but it is intermittent, so there is also more sun. The water this time of year is warmer with the warmest water occurring in the months of March and April.



Consider using a 3 to 5 mm wetsuit if you are going to snorkel. Here a sea lion pup plays with a tourist's camera. © 2006

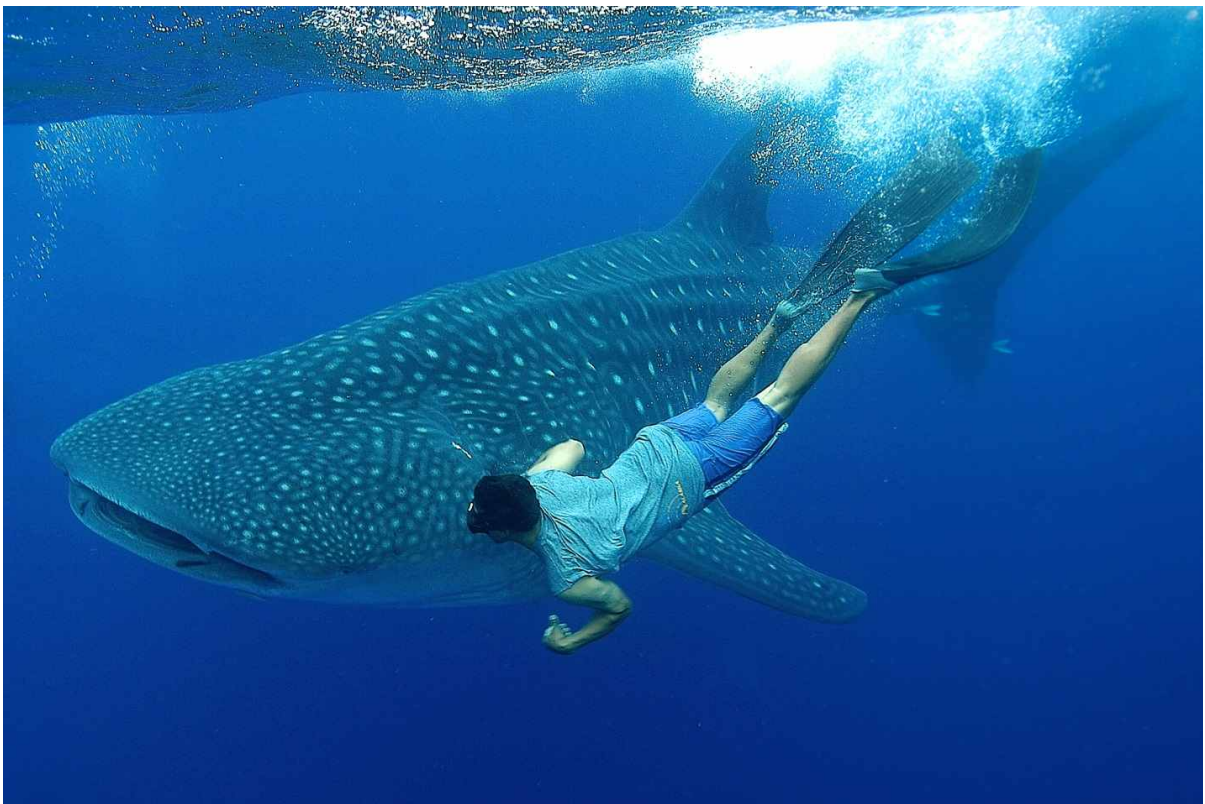
Wetsuits

Regardless if the time of year you visit, your snorkeling time will be much more comfortable if you have a wetsuit. I would recommend a full 3 mm suit if you have one available but any suit that fits you is better than none. Many - but not all - of the yachts and ships have wetsuits available on board. Some include this in the cost of your cruise while others charge an additional fee. In any case there will be a limited number of suits in each size so if you have your own wetsuit, I would recommend that you bring it. If you are unsure if the yacht/ship you will be on has wetsuits available – ask.

Photo and Video

Photography opportunities are endless in Galapagos so make sure you bring your camera and video gear. If you are planning on purchasing new equipment you will need sufficient time to purchase and receive anything you buy before

you leave home. Make sure to add plenty of memory cards and extra batteries to your equipment list. Media cards are sold in many shops, especially in Puerto Ayora, but yachts/ships usually stop there only once during the week, the variety is limited, and it will cost much more than at home. I recommend bringing a laptop computer along, so you can see and play with your images while you're on the trip. It is also a good idea to buy a small peripheral hard drive to download images and video as a backup and to give you more storage flexibility.



You don't have to dive to get a close up look at some of the incredible marine life that waits just below the surface. A snorkeler goes eye to eye with a harmless whale shark. © 2006

The Galápagos National Park does not allow you to use a flash photography on any wildlife on land. In some instances, the flash can be very harmful, especially to some birds dependent upon their eyesight for hunting at night, such as swallowtail gulls. It really isn't a problem to use "fill flash" when

photographing marine iguanas, tortoises, sea Lions or land iguanas, but you must go along with the instructions of your guide. Thankfully, island visits are often made during the middle of the day when ambient light is sufficient for exposures, but you may want to bring small collapsible reflectors to compensate for harsh shadows. A small tripod or monopod is also a valuable accessory. It allows a wider variety of camera settings for different lighting conditions, but be careful where you set it down. If you don't bring a tripod, and you have an automatic camera, try shooting on “continuous” and shoot several frames of the same image. This often helps in reducing camera jiggle after the first frame and gives you a selection of almost-the-same images to choose from. With digital photography, you have the luxury of taking an image and then re-shooting if you don't like the results.



The Galapagos has some of the best diving in the world. Here a red-lipped batfish perches on the sand. © 2011

Diving

The majority of live-aboard yachts and ships in the Galápagos focus on doing land visits, panga rides, and snorkeling excursions (referred to as “Naturalist Trips”). These yachts are not allowed to offer diving. There are others yachts that are dedicated solely for diving. If you are interested in a designated dive trip, please download our eBook “Dive Galápagos”.



A tortoise in the Highlands of Santa Cruz Island. © 2013

Chapter Four

Central Islands

Santa Cruz (Including Mosquera, North Seymour, South Plaza and Santa Fé)

Land Tour Sites

[Darwin Station](#)

[The Highlands](#)

[Black Turtle Cove](#)
[\(Caleta Tortuga Negra\)](#)

[Bachus Beach](#)

Snorkel Sites

[Bachus Beach](#)

[Cerro Dragón](#)

[Islote Mosquera](#)

[North Seymour](#)

[South Plaza](#)

[Santa Fe](#)

[Cerro Dragón](#)

[Islote Mosquera](#)

[North Seymour](#)

[Santa Fe](#)



Southeastern Central Islands Map © 2014

Santa Cruz

Santa Cruz, also named *Indefatigable* , sits in the center of the archipelago. With an area of 986sq km (381sq mi), it is the second-largest island in overall size, having the largest population and the greatest number of tourist facilities. Santa Cruz is the focal point of human activity in the islands, hosting the Galápagos National Park Headquarters, the Charles Darwin Research Station, and Puerto Ayora, the largest settlement. Santa Cruz also has many national Park visitor sites.

The island is a slightly elongated shield volcano that is drier on the leeward, northern half, while the windward southern half is wetter and has more vegetation. Scientists consider it to be an active, though dormant, volcano, which, over time, is drifting slowly eastward on the Nazca Plate. The highest elevation, about 864m (2835ft) is at the crest of Cerro Crocker in the central highlands. Santa Cruz is the only island in the Galápagos with a road that crosses its interior. Running from Puerto Ayora on the south coast, to the north coast where the ferry crosses the narrow Itabaca Channel to Baltra and the airport, this road gives visitors an opportunity to explore some of the highland interior of the island.



Arrangements can be made to take air-conditioned vans to the Santa Cruz Highlands. © 2013

On Santa Cruz, you can see many of the animals that make the Galápagos so unique and interesting. Several subspecies of the Galápagos giant tortoise live and breed at Darwin Station, and the Santa Cruz subspecies is also seen in the highlands, either at El Chato Tortoise Reserve or, more easily, at one of the private ranches that border the reserve. Since these ancient animals don't understand the human-made boundaries, they spend a good part of their time on private land. Iguanas are very prevalent in Puerto Ayora and it is always amusing to see them dozing in the sun in the middle of the sidewalk along the shore of Academy Bay, or crossing the road, seemingly oblivious to cars and people. In addition to the many sea- and shorebirds such as the lava heron, brown pelican, yellow-crowned night heron, and boobies, Darwin's finches are sighted everywhere.



Check out the fish market in Puerto Ayora for some unusual activity and photo opps. © 2013

Almost everyone who visits the Galápagos will pass through Puerto Ayora. It is the main population center in the archipelago, and it is growing by leaps and bounds. Despite the growth, street numbers still are not used and directions are given by describing a location relative to intersections, shops, restaurants or hotels. It has the best selection of hotels, bars, restaurants, stores, Internet cafés, and souvenir shops, plus a Pacific Tel office, post office, domestic airline offices, tourist agencies, a basic hospital, pharmacies, churches, and a radio station.

If you plan to spend some time in Puerto Ayora, there is plenty to do. Your hotel can make private tour arrangements but it can be pretty pricey for only one or two people. Alternatively, book with one of the many operators through offices situated on or near the main frontage road, Avenida Darwin. Most taxi drivers are happy to take small groups to the highlands to visit some of the sites, but most of them speak only Spanish. Shop proprietors will be happy to

call a taxi for you, or just flag one down as it passes. You can visit the lava tubes, the Los Gemelos collapsed craters, the El Chato Tortoise Reserve and neighboring private farms with a taxi driver for about \$30 US for a half-day tour. You can arrange tours to nearby islands. The least expensive of these are to Floreana and Isabela for about \$75 to \$85 dollars per person. Some of the more popular, nearby destinations such as North Seymour, South Plaza and Bartolomé are more expensive at \$125 per person, and prices will probably continue to go up as the National Park tries to restrict the number of visitors at these busier sites.



Tortoises cool off in a pond in the highlands of Santa Cruz. © 2011 Photo by Ken Weemhoff

Accommodations

Puerto Ayora offers a wide spectrum of lodging, from budget hotels to high-end, full service resorts, which afford commanding spectacular vistas and all

the trimmings. If you are staying in town for a few days, there are several nice hotels located on the main street, Darwin Avenida; and three high-end hotels, which are located outside of town.

(To be added)

Land Tour Visitation Site

Charles Darwin Research Station Fausto Llerena Tortoise-Breeding Center

giant tortoises, reintroduction programs

Location: 15 min. walk from the center of Puerto Ayora, NE side of Academy Bay

Access: Walk From town or taxi

Difficulty: Easy walk

The Charles Darwin Research Station CDRS is located on the northeast side of Academy Bay, near the harbor at Puerto Ayora. Alternately called Charles Darwin Station (CDS), or just Darwin Station, it is about 1km (1/2mi), only a 15-minute walk, along the frontage road from the center of town. Entrance to the station is free and visitors can walk the grounds at their own pace. Most naturalist cruises include a stop at Puerto Ayora where their own naturalist guides lead passengers on a tour through the station. If you are not in a group and don't feel like walking, there are plenty of local taxis cruising the streets that you can flag down for a ride to the station. It costs about one dollar US to go anywhere in town.



A giant Tortoise lumbers across one of the tortoise pens at Darwin Station. © 2009

CDRS encompasses a large, diverse terrain, with an elevated wooden boardwalk through some areas and chopped lava paths in other areas. It includes a national park information center, general information and snack kiosks, a scientific library, and several buildings with research labs. Near the entrance, the Van Straelen Exhibition Center contains an informative museum where they present a video (alternating English and Spanish versions) several times a day. However, at the time of this update, the center was closed for repairs. Among the biggest attractions are the tortoise pens with adults of different species, and a baby-tortoise house with incubators where you can see hatchlings and young tortoises. There used to be a large pen, which visitors could enter to see and photograph adult Galápagos tortoises “up close and personal,” and check out the differences between the dome and saddleback species for themselves. In another area, visitors could walk through an

environment where adult tortoises roamed freely. Unfortunately, visitors are no longer allowed to enter these pens and it is uncertain whether this policy will be maintained. What is sad is that the tortoises that live in these pens were formerly family pets turned in to the station and they actually enjoy the interaction with tourists.

CDRS now has captive breeding programs on San Cristóbal and Isabella in addition to the original one started on Santa Cruz in 1960. Since then, this very successful program has returned upwards of 4,000 tortoises, bred and/or raised in captivity to their original habitats on their home islands. Repatriation occurs when they are about four years old. Several of the 10 remaining subspecies can be seen at CDRS. Sadly, in 2012, Lonesome George, the only surviving member of the Isla Pinta subspecies, passed away.

Among the other attractions at the center are paths through examples of Galápagos vegetation where a variety of land birds, including Darwin's finches, are seen. The t-shirts, books, tapes, maps and other souvenirs sold in the retail store help support the research station and cost about the same as in town.



Giant Tortoise (*Geochelone elephantopus*) © 2006

The Galápagos Islands are named for the giant tortoise (Galápagos), one of the world's largest tortoises. These are land dwellers that can weigh up to 227kg (550lbs) and live up to 150 years. All of the giant tortoises in the Galápagos are considered to be members of the same species, but there were originally 14 different subspecies, also called races. Only 10 of the original 14 subspecies remain. They lived on Isabela (the island with the largest population and greatest number of unique subspecies), Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Santiago, Fernandina, Española, Santa Fé, Pinta, Floreana, and Pinzon. They are now extinct on Santa Fé, Floreana, and Fernandina, and have also recently become extinct on Pinta since the last survivor, Lonesome George, died. He was believed to be about 130 years old and lived at CDRS on Santa Cruz until 2012. All efforts to find him an acceptable mate during his life failed.

The races have two basic shell shapes, depending on where they live and what they eat. Saddleback tortoises have a large (saddle shaped) notch in the

front of their shells and a long neck and legs. They live in more arid areas of the coastal lowlands on islands like Española, Fernandina, and Pinzón, which are drier and where food is not as abundant. The notched shell allows the tortoise to lift its neck and head up high enough to reach leaves from low-branched trees and shrubs. Dome-backed tortoises inhabit highland regions, especially around the volcanoes of Santa Cruz and Isabela. They are much larger than the Saddlebacks, have larger, dome-shaped shells, and they feed close to the ground on grasses, plants and fallen fruit.



Fausto Llerena Exhibit at the Darwin Research Station. © 2013

Galápagos tortoises mate in their highland homes during the wet, rainy season, then move down to the arid zones to nest. The first females start the trek downhill around March, followed by the males. Females lay eggs from June to December and babies are born between three and eight months later, depending on the altitude of the nest (higher elevations take longer). Dome-backed tortoises lay 12 to 15 eggs, while Saddlebacks lay 4 to 5 eggs.

Because these behemoths can live up to a year with no food or water, they were highly prized by sailors, who stacked them in the holds by the hundreds to use for fresh meat on their long voyages. The tortoises were removed in such great numbers that they were rapidly becoming extinct by the 20th century. Thanks to the efforts of environmentalists and nature lovers, most of the tortoise subspecies have been saved.

The easiest place for visitors to see giant tortoises in the wild today is on Santa Cruz, in the deep grasses and muddy ponds of the highlands, in the El Chato Reserve or on the surrounding private ranches.



A group of tourists stand at the edge of one of two enormous sinkholes, Los Gemelos. © 2013

Land Tour Visitation Site

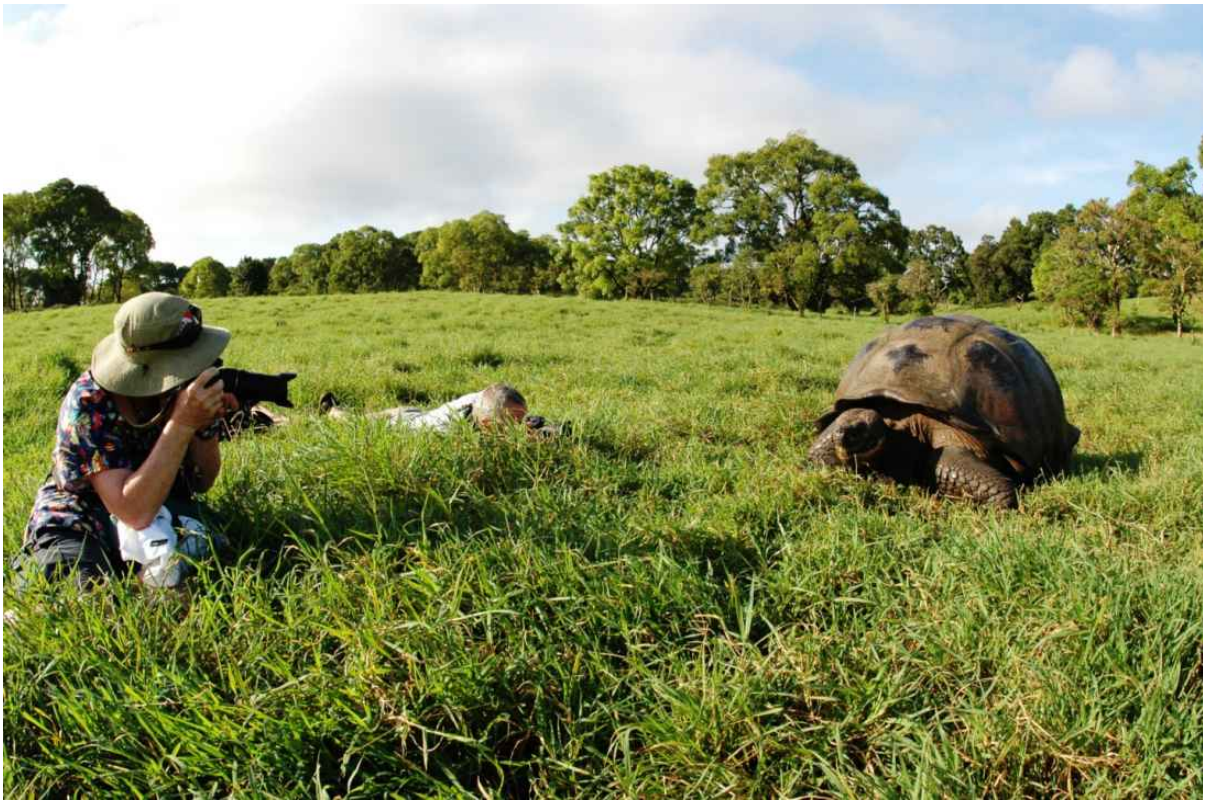
**The Highlands of Santa Cruz tortoises, lava tubes, pit craters,
scalesia forest**

Location: Santa Cruz Highlands

Access: By tour bus or taxi

Difficulty: Easy hiking, ladders, climbing

There are many interesting attractions in the Santa Cruz Highlands. On request, operators may organize bus tours to the highlands for the whole group. This can include a visit to a hacienda or ranch with lunch prepared and served there or at nearby highland restaurants. It is a relaxing time in the fresh, cooler air, and some of the haciendas have a pool and they will lend you swimsuits, towels and hammocks.



A tortoise takes time out from its busy day to pose for tourists. © 2006

Los Gemelos (The Twins)

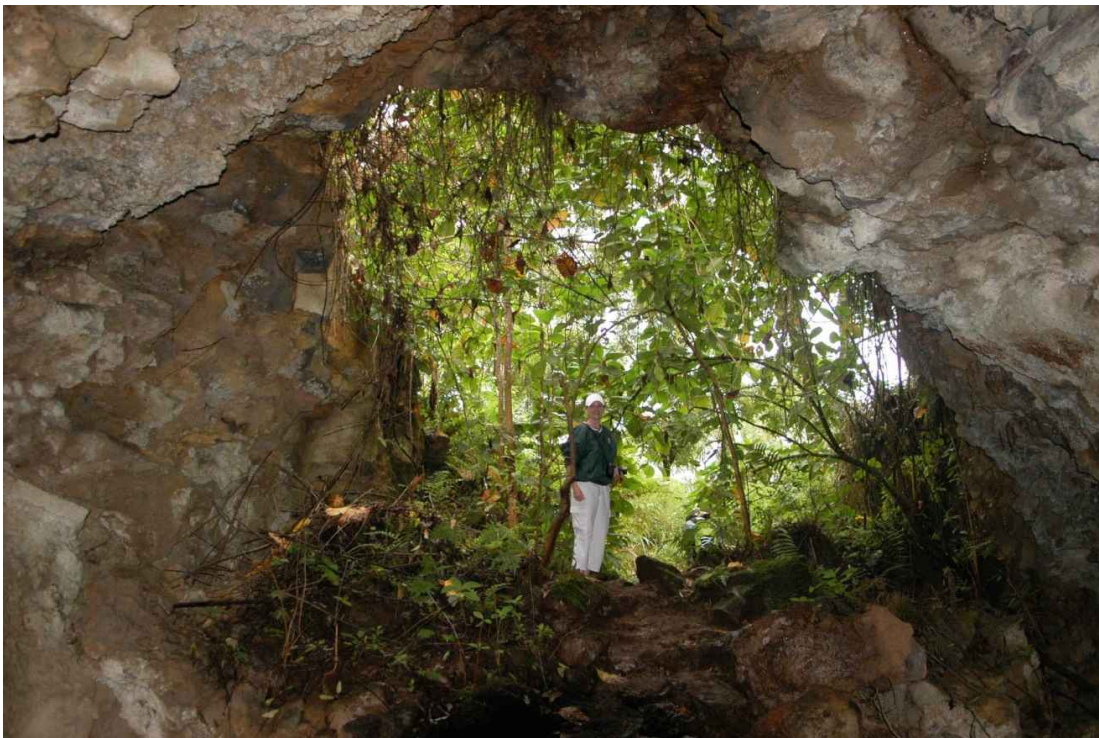
Los Gemelos are two enormous sinkholes near the summit of the island, formed when the roofs of empty magma chambers collapsed. They are surrounded by lush green vegetation and are close to the road with very easy

access via a dirt path. You might catch sight of the startlingly bright red vermilion flycatcher, a Galápagos hawk or Darwin's finches. There is only a thin wooden rail at the edge of the crater, so be careful not to back up too far when shooting photos. Individuals not on a tour can get here by taking the main cross island road about 12km (7-1/2mi) west of Bellavista to Santa Rosa village, then continuing another 2km (1mi) to the sinkholes.

Scalesia Forest

The next stop on the tour is a short distance away for a brief hike on an easy, circular path through the dense foliage of the scalesia forest and a glorious view over Santa Cruz.

Another interesting aspect of the highlands tour is a very real demonstration of the demarcation between the National Park territory and private land. A guarded gate crosses the road at each point where they meet, and all vehicles must stop. You'll pass the same spot a couple of times on the tour. Fortunately, there are no such gates anywhere along the main cross-island road.



A tourist pauses at the opening to a lava tube. © 2009

El Chato Tortoise Reserve

This reserve is about 3km (2mi) west of Santa Rosa and it is National Park territory so an official guide must accompany visitors. It is also very easy to get lost. The large reserve covers hilly terrain with dense brush that can be treacherously slippery from the usual mist and even worse after a rain. It's entirely possible that a strenuous hike may yield no sightings of tortoises because they are hidden within the dense vegetation or have already started their trek to the lowlands where the females lay their eggs.

Instead of going to the reserve, most tours visit one of the private farms that border the reserve, but everyone in the group must agree because there is a nominal extra charge. It is only a few dollars per person and well worth it. The farmers know exactly where the tortoises are located at any given time, and it is a short walk at most (it may still be wet and muddy). In this natural habitat of algae-covered pools and grasses, you're likely to see up to ten or twelve of the fascinating animals in various sizes (all big)! After the visit, passengers are usually offered either fresh watermelon or a local lemon tea, depending on the weather. Individuals can walk around without a guide or tour. The farms are off the main road, near Santa Rosa, so just ask someone to point you to "Primisias" (Rancho Primisias, owned by Henri Moreno), Steve's butterfly farm (Finca de Steve Devine - \$4 entrance fee) - there aren't any butterflies here, but it does have a bar if you prefer to sit and rest while your friends are trekking around - or "El Chato" (not the official reserve, but the private land owned by Miguel Angel Arias).

Lava Tubes (Los Túneles)

There are four lava tubes on private property in the Santa Cruz highlands that can be visited by the public, usually in conjunction with a visit to see the giant tortoises. All logistics are covered if you are on a tour, but if you go on your own, the entrance fee is \$3 US and the owner provides a guide and

flashlights. The owners are: Furio Valbonesi (entrance is just inside the main gate to the Royal Palm Hotel), Miguel Angel Arias, Steve Devine, and Antonio Gallardo (all are closer to Santa Rosa). These underground tunnels were formed when the outside skin of a molten lava flow cooled and solidified while the lava inside kept flowing, emptying the solid skin and leaving hollow tunnels up to 20m (66ft) high. Some tunnels are more than 1km (1/2mi) long and at least one story high. It is fairly easy to climb down over large lava boulders or down short ladders or flights of wooden stairs to gain access to the interiors. Owners have strung lights in some of the tunnels.

Panga Visitation Site

Black Turtle Cove (Caleta Tortuga Negra) mangroves, golden cowrays, sharks, birds

Location: North side of Santa Cruz, west of Itabaca channel

Access: Panga ride

Difficulty: Easy one-hour Panga ride

This is a panga ride only and, if possible, it is best-visited in the early morning or late afternoon when there is more activity and the lighting is more dramatic. As the panga plies the small passageways among the mangroves, keep an eye out for a variety of birds, including herons and brown pelicans, perched in the thick branches. Look for schools of golden cowrays and young white-tipped reef sharks in the shallows. If you are there between January and March, you might be lucky enough to see green sea turtles mating. For great photos, use a polarizer to reduce glare on the surface of the water, and shoot with the sun behind you to maximize light and color saturation.



Black Turtle Cove offers some great photo opportunities. © 2011



Marine iguanas sun themselves on the rocks at Bachas Beach © 2006

Land Tour Visitation Site

Bachas Beach

turtle nests, flamingoes, marine iguanas

Location: North shore of Santa Cruz, west of Itabaca channel

Access: Panga ride and wet landing on beach

Difficulty: Easy walk

Bachas Beach got its name when a barge that was left at Baltra broke loose and floated there. Spanish-speaking locals pronounced “barge” as “bachas.” (It is pronounced like the “ch” in “choo” not like the “k” in “back”). This is a wet landing on a nice beach, where sea turtles nest in the spring. Flamingos are

often seen wading in a good-sized lagoon just behind the beach. To start this one-hour walk, head inland from the beach, climbing over the mangrove roots as you skirt the lagoon. The path is not entirely obvious so stay close to the group. The route will twist and turn, winding past a series of six small lagoons that provide refuge for a population of about 500-600 birds. Along the way, look for yellow warblers, Darwin finches, lava gulls, and shorebirds such as black-neck stilts, sanderlings, and whimbrels.



A pelican nests among the branches of mangrove-lined lagoons at Cerro Dragon. © 2009

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Cerro Dragon

frigatebirds, herons, blue-footed boobies

Location: NW coast of Santa Cruz, west of Itabaca channel

Access: Panga ride and dry landing on beach

Difficulty: Easy 1km (1/2mile) hike

Cerro Dragon (Dragon Hill) is a two-part land visit. The first part is an awe-inspiring panga ride through a series of lagoons; the second is a land visit with a dry landing. On the far northwest coast of Santa Cruz, the site is only accessible during four months of the year and in the spring when the sea is calm and the water clear. The panga enters a beautiful lava and mangrove-lined lagoon through a small opening to the sea. Golden cowrays swim in formations close to the surface, sometimes schooling with spotted eagle rays, and they seem to have no fear of the boat, performing a water ballet around the panga. White-tipped reef sharks can also be found in the inner lagoon. On the ridge above the lagoon, palo santo (holy stick) trees and tree-sized opuntia and candelabra cactus are rife with great frigatebirds and blue-footed boobies. The boat passes so close to shore that you can easily make out the difference between the lava herons and striated herons without binoculars. Marine iguanas and brightly colored Sally lightfoot crabs patrol the lava near the water and land iguanas sun themselves on the dry lava further up the shoreline.

The land visit is billed as a dry landing, but you might have to scamper up some slippery lava rocks where a pelican might be standing guard. It is an easy, quiet 2km (1mi) walk on a flat, hard-packed trail through a somewhat dry landscape peppered with palo santo trees and opuntia cactus. The panorama of Dragon Hill is always in sight in the distance, and you'll skirt a small lake where it is reflected in the water - a beautiful photo opportunity at the right time of day. There seem to be fewer birds here than elsewhere, but there are some quite large land iguanas that are frequently skirmishing with one another. You will also see quick-moving lava lizards, Darwin's finches and white-flowered Galápagos cotton plants.



Galapagos sea lion pup on Islote Mosquera. © 2013

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Islote Mosquera

sea lion rookery, shorebirds

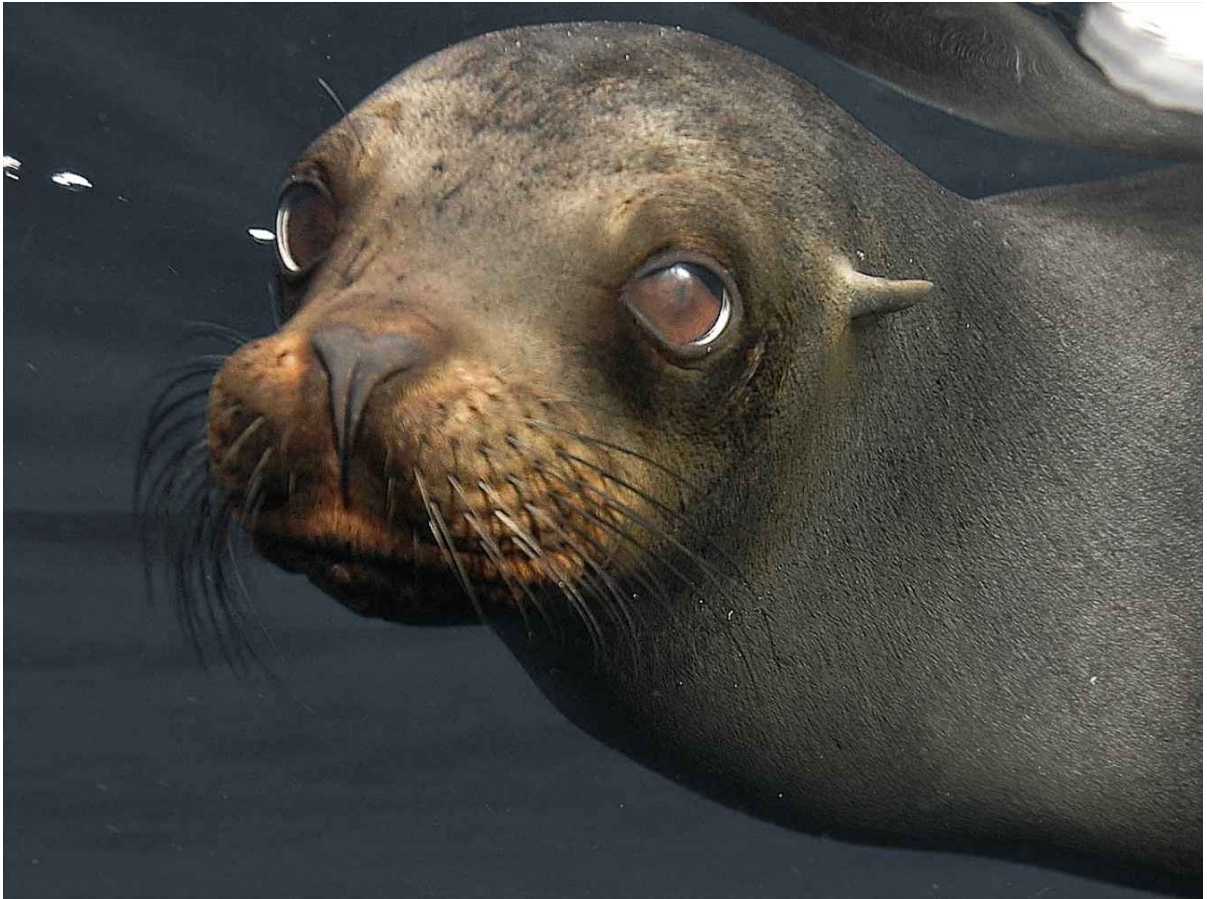
Location: Between Baltra and North Seymour

Access: Wet landing on a sandy beach

Difficulty: Easy walk

After a wet landing on the white sand beach, there is no marked trail and you are on your own to navigate between the resident sea lions. Plan to spend at least 45 minutes exploring the islet. In June and July, the newly born pups are curious enough to grab and tug on camera snaps and nuzzle exposed body parts. Pelicans, herons and lava gulls are the birds seen most often. This islet is often visited on the morning of the last day of naturalist cruises if your flight

leaves from Baltra airport. This site also affords an excellent chance to snorkel with sea lion pups and adults.



Snorkeling around Mosquera affords excellent opportunities to interact with sea lions. © 2009



A male frigatebird displays its red throat pouch to attract females. North Seymour © 2009

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

North Seymour

boobies, frigatebirds, marine iguanas, land iguanas

Location: SW corner of North Seymour, off the north end of Baltra

Access: Dry landing

Difficulty: Easy, but fairly long walk, wear sturdy shoes

North Seymour is considered a dry landing site, but the relatively flat lava rocks can be quite slippery. Because it is so close to Santa Cruz, it is one of the most visited sites, but it is also one of the most fascinating land excursions. After the initial scramble over the lava rocks to get ashore, the rest of the trail is mostly flat and an easy hike. The tour begins at the southwest corner of the island, and the trail is a large loop where you will notice a rich variety of

wildlife including sea lions, blue-footed boobies, frigate birds, lava gulls, pelicans, marine iguanas and land iguanas. You will pass through the nesting areas of frigate birds and blue-footed boobies. During the spring mating season, the male frigates try to attract females by displaying the huge, red, balloon-like sac on their throats, and you will enjoy watching the amusing mating dance of the blue-footed boobies. Starting around the end of April, these birds will be sitting on eggs or interacting with fluffy, newly-hatched chicks or “teenagers” demanding to be fed. Blue-footed boobies nest from May through November. The boobies have little regard for the marked trails and frequently construct their Spartan nests in the very middle of the footpaths, which are supposed to be reserved for human visitors.



Blue-footed boobies show off their unusual mating rituals. © 2011

Boobies

Three of the seven known booby species in the world live in the Galápagos. They all nest in colonies and have a long, pointed bill and web feet, with which

they incubate their eggs. They can fly long distances to search for food, dive for fish from heights up to 15m (50ft), and can swim very well underwater.

The red-footed booby (*Sula Sula*) is the smallest of the three, with a light blue beak and dark eyes. Most individuals are a light tan color on the chest and head with brown wings, but a small number of birds (only 5%) are almost pure white. Considered a different color “phase,” these birds remain white throughout their lives. The only members of the gannet and booby family (*Sulidae*) to nest in trees, their red feet are specially adapted to standing on branches. The nests are fairly solid structures of twigs, feathers and guano. Red-footed boobies lay a single egg and both sexes incubate it and fend for the young. They fly as far as 50 nautical miles out to sea to find pelagic fish, their favored food. Visitors can see nesting colonies on Genovesa and at Punta Pitt on San Cristóbal. They also nest on Wolf and Darwin.



Perhaps the most well known of the boobies is the blue-footed booby. © 2009

The blue-footed booby (*Sula nebouxi*) is quite distinctive with its large, vivid, eggshell blue feet. Their ancestors were nest-builders, but modern blue-

footed boobies lost that ability in these isolated islands. Instead, they make a primitive circle of rocks, twigs and guano, and they lay up to three eggs directly on the ground. The blue-footed booby has the most entertaining courtship rituals, making extraordinary whistling noises and lifting their feet in a curious dance. However, if environmental conditions are not right, the blue-footed are the only boobies that will not nest. They feed on fish found near the shoreline, or closer to the islands than the other two species. The most widespread of the boobies in the Galápagos, they are seen at Genovesa, Santa Fé, Española, Floreana, Rábida, Daphne, North Seymour, Isabela, and Fernandina.



The Nazca Booby is the most beautiful of the boobies found in the Galápagos. © 2009

Ornithologists now agree that the third booby species found in the Galápagos is the Nazca booby (*Sula granti*). Until recently, it was thought to have been the masked booby (*Sula dactylatra*) or a subspecies of the masked booby, sometimes called the green-footed or white booby. It is now recognized

as a separate species altogether, although it is very difficult to differentiate between the two. The Nazca booby is named after the Nazca (tectonic) Plate, upon which the islands sit. The reclassification is fairly recent. Previously this booby was referred to as the masked booby.

It is the largest of the three boobies in the Galápagos, with a long, solid neck and a strong, cone-shaped bill. Its distinctive plumage is mostly white with dark feathers edging the wings, and its orange beak and surrounding skin are dark and brightly colored. Like other boobies, it has fully webbed feet, and it nests on the ground like the blue-footed booby. The female typically lays two eggs, which the male helps to incubate, but only the first chick to hatch will survive because it kicks the younger chick out of the nest. The Nazca booby feeds further from the islands than the blue-footed, but not as far out to sea as the red-footed booby. Visitors can see them most easily at Genovesa, Punta Suarez on Española, and Punta Pitt on San Cristóbal. They are also on Rábida, North Seymour, Wolf and Darwin.



Swallowtail gulls nest on South Plaza. © 2010

Land Tour Visitation Site

South Plaza

gulls, land iguanas, marine iguanas, cliffs, sea lions

Location: Off the east coast of Santa Cruz

Access: Dry Landing, dock built to accommodate the number of visitors

Difficulty: Fairly easy, but long walk, (1 hour)

This popular site is just off the east coast of Santa Cruz and close to Puerto Ayora, so it attracts large numbers of visitors. There is an incredible diversity of wildlife despite the fact that the island is little more than 1km (1/2mi) long and perhaps 100m (330ft) wide.

When visitors arrive on the shore, guides often have to shoo away the sea lions that have taken positions on and around the cement walkway. Right next to the jetty, large numbers of Sally Lightfoot crabs and marine iguanas lounge on or clamber over the boulders. As soon as you walk a few steps from the jetty, you will see a number of large, colorful land iguanas sunning themselves under opuntia cactus or eating the prickly pear fruit. You may also notice a hybrid of the marine iguana and land iguana, distinguishable by its striking vertical stripes.



South Plaza is home to many large land iguanas. © 2013

Follow the trail up a gentle incline to the cliff face that overlooks Santa Cruz, where you will have fairly close looks at the beautiful red-billed tropicbirds and swallowtail gulls flying over their nests in the cliffs. South Plaza is an uplifted section of land, similar to North Seymour. The side of the island with the trail is treeless, but it is covered with the carpet of the endemic sea purslane, which turns red from May to December, and a scattering of opuntia cactus. The trail runs through a “bachelor” colony of sea lions and then alongside one of the largest sea lion colonies in the archipelago.



Sally Lightfoot crabs cover the rocky shore at Santa Fe. © 2011

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Santa Fe

gulls, Santa Fe land iguanas, marine iguanas, opuntia cactus, cliffs, sea lions

Location: between San Cristobal and Santa Cruz islands

Access: Wet Landing onto a beach

Difficulty: Fairly easy, (1.5 hours)

Santa Fé (also named Barrington) was formed when thick basaltic lava uplifted from the sea. It is about a one to two hour boat ride due east of Puerto Ayora, depending on the speed of the boat. The small, almost round island is about 24sq km (15sq mi). The rocky shore is rife with sea lions, Sally lightfoot crabs, and huge opuntia cactus trees, which are uniquely adapted to a now extinct species of giant tortoise. The younger smaller plants are covered in

spines to protect the paddles from being eaten by the tortoises but as the trees grow larger and the paddles reach a certain height (higher than the tortoise could reach) the spines fall off the base of the plant. Among the cactus briars, you can see and hear birds calling - yellow warblers, Galápagos mockingbirds and finches. You may also encounter Galapagos Hawks, Galapagos Snakes, Galapagos Mockingbirds and/or rice rats. Santa Fe is the home of the Santa Fe Land Iguana, which is the second species of land iguana in Galapagos and is endemic to this one island.



A unique species of land iguana resides only on Santa Fe. © 2009 Photo by Ken Weemhoff The southeast end has a small, white sand beach where green sea turtles visit. I once observed killer whales hunting sea lions on this beach! The island is also the home to the Santa Fe land Iguana, which is endemic to this island, (found nowhere else in the world).



A Galapagos Penguin stands on the shoreline near Pinnacle Rock, Bartolomé. © 2009

Chapter Five

Northwestern Central Islands

Santiago Island (Including Rabida, Sombrero Chino and Bartolomé)

Land Tour Sites

[Sullivan Bay](#)

[Espumilla Beach](#)

[Puerto Egas](#)

[Sombrero Chino](#)

[Rabida](#)

Bartolomé

Snorkel Sites

[Puerto Egas](#)

[Sombrero Chino](#)

[Rabida](#)

Bartolomé

[The Summit](#)

[Pinnacle Rock](#)

[The Beaches](#)



Northwest Central Islands Map © 2014



The fading sun highlights an old lava flow on Bartolomé. © 2009

Santiago

Santiago (also called James and San Salvador) is located just northwest of Santa Cruz. It is the fourth largest island in the archipelago and one of two large volcanic islands in the central region. It is composed of tuff cones, young lava flows and two volcanoes. Now uninhabited, the island once had an active salt mining operation from 1961 to 1963. Marine iguanas, the sharp-billed Darwin's ground finch, Sally lightfoot crabs, lava lizards, and blue-footed boobies are regularly seen around the island. Santiago also has a race of giant tortoises, but don't expect to see them.

James Bay

James Bay, on the northwest coast of Santiago, has an interesting pahoe-hoe lava flow of still-shiny basaltic glass that erupted sometime between 1684 and 1835. This date range is known because when Charles Darwin arrived in 1835, he found marmalade jars imbedded in the flow with a 1684 manufacture date.

South of James Bay is a saltwater lake, the surface of which is about 10m (33ft) below sea level. Its salt deposits gave rise to the salt mining business.



Tourists prepare for a wet landing on the northwest shore of Santiago. © 2004

Buccaneer Cove

Buccaneer Cove is also on the west coast, close to the northern tip of the island. Once an anchorage used by pirates, it has a reddish-purple sand beach where sea lions relax, but it is rarely visited now.

Sullivan Bay

Sullivan Bay is on the east coast of Santiago, facing Bartolomé. A small trail makes a 2 km (1.2mi) loop around the tuff cones and through the ropey pahoehoe lava flows. Walking over the black basalt is very hot, so bring extra water and wear thick-soled shoes. There is a dry landing on the rocks or a wet landing on a small beach.

Espumilla Beach

Espumilla Beach, north of James Bay, is made up of golden sand and lined with mangroves. This site sometimes takes the term "wet landing" to a new level because of the high surf. Turtles nest in the sand dunes, so be careful where you step. Feral pigs, one of the animals introduced by humans, have been a constant threat to the survival of young turtles, but authorities now believe that they have been eradicated on Santiago. There are two brackish lagoons behind the beach where pelicans, pintail ducks and black-necked stilts are plentiful. Following the trail inland, keep an eye out for the beautiful vermillion flycatcher, the broad billed flycatcher, and some of the ten species of finches found on Santiago.



An Octopus is discovered in a tide pool at Puerto Egas. © 2010 Photo by Ken Weemhoff

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Puerto Egas

marine iguanas, fur seal grotto, herons

Location: South end of James Bay, west side of Santiago

Access: Wet beach Landing

Difficulty: Easy, but long, hot walk, sturdy shoes

Puerto Egas, at the southern end of James Bay, is a popular visitation site. After a wet landing on the black sand beach, visitors have a choice of activities. They can spread their beach towels and snorkel or sunbathe alongside inquisitive sea lions or watch the yacht crew stretch their land legs in a friendly soccer game.



Tourists explore the interesting terrain at Puerto Egas. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff

A fairly easy walk along the shoreline can take over an hour because there is so much to grab your attention. You'll pass the bare remains of a few buildings from the salt mining days and tide pools full of green algae (favorite meal of

marine iguanas) on the way to "the fur seal grottos." These are deep, natural pools of clear water, open to the sea, where sea lions and fur sea lions (popularly called fur seals) like to frolic. Once on the verge of extinction, the fur sea lion population is now in good health. Look in the tide pools for octopus, starfish and other sea life caught there when the tide is out. This is a good place to get close to shorebirds like great blue herons, lava herons, Galápagos American oystercatchers, yellow-crowned night herons, whimbrels, semi-palmated plovers, Galápagos doves, and wandering tattlers.

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Sombrero Chino

lava tubes, sea lions, penguins

Location: 200m (600ft), off Santiago's SE shore

Access: Wet Beach Landing

Difficulty: Easy, rocky trail – easy protected snorkel



A sea lion cools off in the shallow water. © 2009

Sombrero Chino is a small islet shaped like its namesake - a Chinese hat. It is only about 200 m (600ft) off Santiago's southeastern shore, and separated by a beautiful, shallow, turquoise channel that has good snorkeling. The whole island is only a single, steep-sided cinder cone. Its sides are dotted with spatter cones, lava tubes and areas of pahoehoe lava. After a wet beach landing, the trail gives way to a primeval landscape of volcanic rubble including cracked lava formations and lava tubes. You can take a short walk on the lava bedrock along the west coast (facing Santiago) to look for marine iguanas feeding in the tide pools, or visit the white sand beach with its sea lion colony and occasional sightings of Galápagos hawks on the north shore. You may also spot American Oystercatchers as well as penguins along the shoreline. The shallow cove here presents some interesting snorkeling with sea lions and an occasional penguin. You might encounter eagle rays out swimming above the sand or white-tip reef sharks tucked into crevices near the shoreline.

Rabida

Rábida (also named Jervis), one of two small islands to the south of Santiago, is essentially a cluster of steep-sided domes, flows, and pyroclastic cinder cones. The interior of the island is dominated by the peak of a single, sparsely vegetated, eroded cone. Often called the geographic center of the Galápagos, Rabida has the most diversified variety of rock and lava types of all the islands. The north shore has dark red cinder cliffs at the western end and a rocky promontory jutting out to the northeast where marine iguanas and lava herons enjoy sunbathing among a few opuntia cactus and palo santo trees. Between these two points is a long, dark red lava beach formed by the erosion of the cliffs.



**Rabida is one of the most picturesque visitation sites in the Galápagos. ©2009 Ken Weemhoff
Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site**

Rabida

lava tubes, sea lions, penguins, juvenile sea lions, schools of fish, small sharks

Location: NE corner of Rabida, off south shore of Santiago

Access: Wet landing on beach

Difficulty: Easy to moderate 45-minute walk – easy protected snorkel

The visit starts with a wet landing on the red sand beach located in the northeast corner of the island. This beach is lined with saltbush plants and is literally strewn with a large, healthy population of sea lions. They usually ignore the humans staring at them as they nurse their young and go about their daily lives. The saltbush hides a salt pond, surrounded by white and black mangrove trees. Visitors stroll the beach area and then begin the tour at the "bachelor sea lion colony" near the eastern end of the pond. Here, young males bide their time until they are ready to fight for their own harems, and the older bulls without a harem, while away their days. Continuing along the edge of the pond, you may find white-cheeked pintail ducks and beautiful black-necked stilts with their distinctive long red legs and black and white feathers.



A sea lion pup finds a cozy spot for a nap on the red beach at Rabida. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff

Other shorebirds like whimbrels and ruddy turnstones often visit here, and you can sometimes see greater flamingoes feeding on brine shrimp. This diet causes their distinctive pink color, as young flamingos are white and only turn bright pink after eating the shrimp. Brown pelicans nest in the mangroves lining the inland side of the pond. As you walk back along the beach, it is fascinating to watch their proficient feeding behavior. They soar high up in the sky and then plunge recklessly into the ocean like dive-bombers, surfacing with a wriggling catch inside their enormous beaks. Watch for Galapagos hawks striking regal and somewhat indifferent poses on the branches of the taller trees. This is a nice, protected bay for a calm snorkel after the walk.

Rábida is one of the best spots for snorkeling in all the Galápagos Islands because there are many varieties of colorful reef fishes in the protected area between the beach and the end of the promontory. The shallows usually have

relatively clear water, making it easier to see and identify fish. Snorkelers will often see small sharks, rays and marine iguanas at close range.



Pinnacle Rock makes an impressive sight in the late afternoon. © 2013

Bartolomé

Bartolomé is a small, 1.2sq km (1/2sq mi) island with a glorious, golden sand beach. It sits a short distance offshore, in Sullivan Bay on the east coast of Santiago, and just south of Cousins Rock. A formation known as “Pinnacle Rock” juts up on the right side of the cove as yachts approach the north side of the island. Together with the awesome view from the top of the volcano on the northwest part of Bartolomé, it is one of the most photographed landmarks in the entire archipelago. The island is home to a population of about 30 Galápagos penguins, the only variety north of the equator, giving visitors their best opportunity to get close and swim with them in the wild. A land visit to the summit and a snorkel with penguins are often done in conjunction. The

Galápagos National Park Service sets the itinerary during which yachts may visit this area.

Land Tour Visitation Site

The Summit (Bartolomé)

panoramic views, lunar-like landscape

- Location:** NE end of Bartolomé
- Access:** Dry landing, lava rock jetty (can be slippery if wet from waves)
- Difficulty:** Moderate incline on path, 365 wooden stairs, moderately taxing climb

This is one of the most visited sites in the islands, and because the land cruises and day boats from Santa Cruz visit frequently; most of the time, several yachts are anchored in the harbor and the path may be crowded with people. Looking back from the summit, the staircase may appear to be a long trail of busy ants at work. However, if your yacht arrives in the late afternoon, the summit can be deserted.



The view looking back at the steps that lead to the summit of Bartolomé. © 2013

Pangas drop passengers off at a rock jetty that is a favorite hangout for local sea lions and the transfer to land can be a bit challenging to negotiate when there are swells. From there, the trail is about 600m (2000ft) long. Just past the jetty you'll walk through a short section of grayish ash, then a sloping path of dark, rust-red sandy earth (it's actually eroded volcanic tufa) leads past volcanic tuff cones, spatter cones, and pahoehoe lava flows in interesting formations. The going gets a bit easier when you reach the connected wooden platforms and 365 stairs over the steepest section of the trek. They were built over the soft lava by GNPS to protect it against further erosion.



Nothing except a few solitary lava cactus plants grow on Bartolomé. © 2013

The surreal, lunar-like landscape is practically devoid of plant life, but some arid zone plants have started to put down fragile roots beside the trail and a few cactus plants have found a home near a couple of spatter cones. Small lava lizards blend in so well with the color of the rock and sand that you will have to look very closely to see them. It takes about 30 minutes to climb to the 114m (374ft) top of Bartolomé, where the platform widens out to accommodate several groups of tourists at the same time. At the summit is a Galápagos National Park monument and a spectacular view of Pinnacle Rock, Sullivan Bay and Santiago, making the climb well worth the effort.

Land Tour Visitation Site

The Beaches (Bartolomé)

penguins, sea lions, pelicans and beaches

Location: NE end of Bartolomé, cove next to Pinnacle Rock

Access: Wet landing, beach

Difficulty: Easy walk

It is a joy to sink your feet into the beautiful, soft, warm, golden-colored sand in the picturesque cove next to Pinnacle Rock, one of the premier spots for beaching, swimming and snorkeling in the islands. Just standing on the beach, you can see pelicans dive into the water and come up with fish in their beaks at one moment, and the next time you blink, there will be penguins scooting by in the shallows looking for their next meal. Also, try exploring the tide pools around the rocks.

Another sand beach on the southern side of the promontory is reached by a short 100m (330ft) trail. Green sea turtles nest here between January and March, and rays and small sharks swim just off the beach. In order to protect the marine life, snorkeling is not allowed on this beach, but you can wade in the very shallow water, where you may encounter a turtle. Be careful not to step on a stingray, and get a nasty sting.



A Galápagos penguin gets an up close and personal look at a snorkeler. © 2009

Snorkel Site and Panga Ride

Pinnacle Rock (Bartolomé) penguins, sea lions, pelicans, lava flows and sharks

Location: NW side of Bartolomé

Difficulty: Easy snorkel - access from beach or by panga

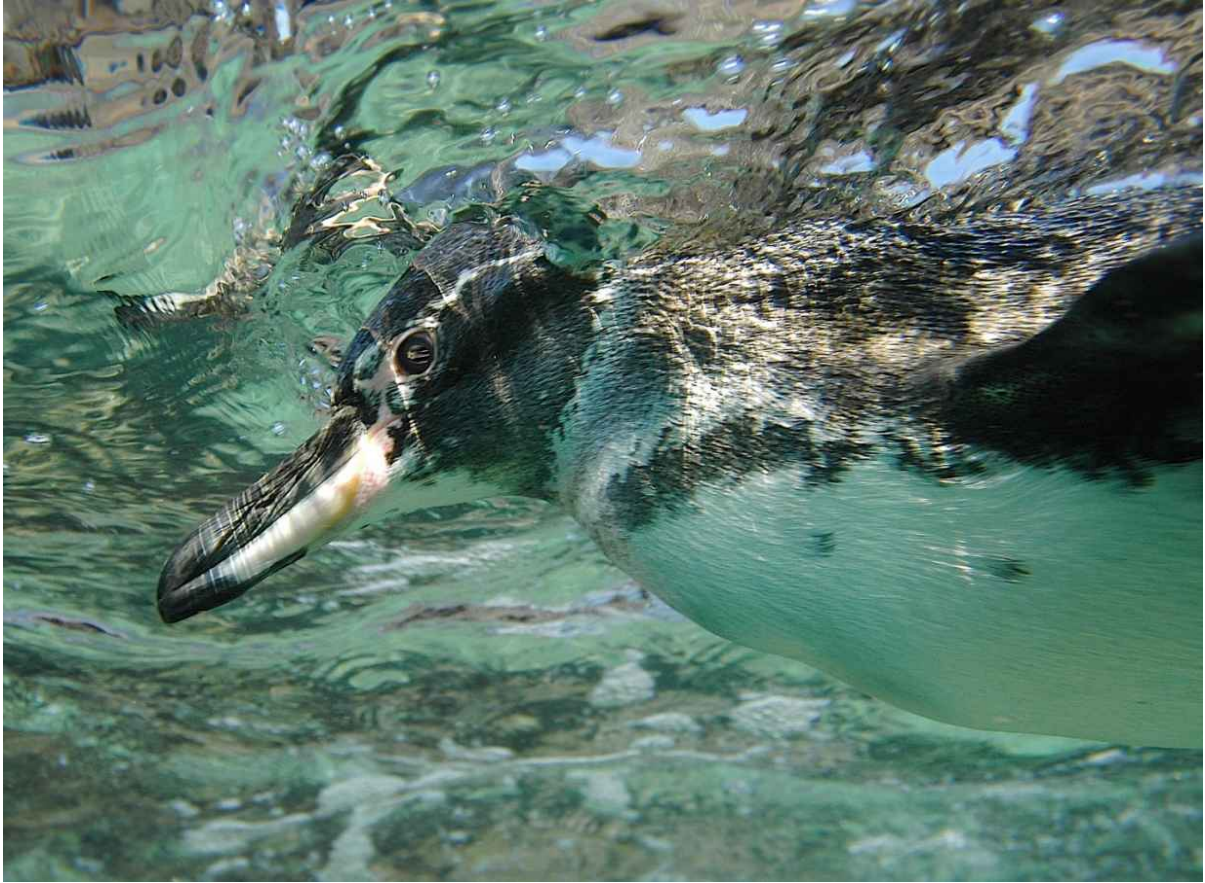
From the beach

Here, with a lot less effort, snorkelers can see many of the same species that many divers go to great lengths to seek out. It is fun to swim in and out of the rocks covered with short-spined sea urchins, watching the ever-changing dance below. Performers may include large, bright-colored parrotfish, streamer hogfish, wrasses, damselfish, schools of surgeonfish and the barely moving

green and pencil sea urchins. A white-tipped reef shark, up to 2m (6ft) in length, could even cruise by you or you might see one resting on the sand bottom. Galápagos penguins leave the shoreline and the warmth of their cubbyholes tucked away in the lava flows to hunt for schools of baitfish that swarm beneath the surface. You can see them whiz by on the surface.

From a Panga

The best and most exciting way to see and photograph the penguins is by taking a panga ride close to the rocks on either side of the cove, where you can get within 2-3m (5-10ft). Jump into the panga with land cameras and snorkel gear for a ride along the shoreline. Diminutive Galápagos penguins, decked out in formal attire, are almost always standing or lying on their stomachs on the rocks at the water line. They appear to be quite near-sighted and are very awkward on land. Bending over as they walk, they seem to be trying to get a better view of their next step. Actually they are trying to keep the sun off their feet, which are prone to severe sunburn. It is a completely different matter when they plunge into the water, as these small creatures can hit speeds of 40 knots underwater and can make right angle turns in a flash. This makes them very effective predators. When schools of baitfish are plentiful (mainly during the Garua season due to the high concentration of nutrients in the water), the penguins usually hunt together and spend less time in the water.



A Galápagos penguin swims at the surface near Pinnacle Rock. © 2009

Galápagos Penguin (*Spheniscus mendiculus*)

Endemic to the Galápagos, it is the most northerly penguin species in the world. These penguins can survive so close to the equator thanks to the cold water in the archipelago. They breed primarily on Isabella and Fernandina because the Humboldt Current keeps things cool there. Probably the best place to see them, both on the surface and underwater is on the north side of Bartolomé, near Pinnacle Rock. The penguins are accustomed to pangas getting within a few feet of them when they're standing on the shore, and snorkelers can get pretty close to them in the water when they are feeding. The total population in the archipelago consists of only a few thousand birds. Galápagos penguins are seriously threatened when the water temperature

warms by even a few degrees. The 1997-98 El Niño caused a very poor breeding season for them.



Exhausted female sea turtle rests on the beach after running a gauntlet of amorous males, Floreana © 2006

Chapter Six

Southern Islands

Floreana, Espanola and San Cristobal

Land Tour Sites

Floreana

Punta Cormoran

Post Office Bay

Baroness Lookout

Española

Gardner Bay (Bahia Gardner)

Snorkel Sites

Floreana

Devil's Crown

Española

Islote Gardner

[Punta Suarez](#)

[San Cristobal](#)

[Interpretation Center](#)

[Cerro de las Tijeretas](#)

[La Galapaguera](#)

[Isla Lobos](#)

[Kicker Rock](#)

[Punta Pitt](#)

[San Cristobal](#)

[Cueva de los Lobos](#)

[Isla Lobos](#)

[Punta Pitt](#)



Southern Islands Map © 2014



Sally Lightfoot crabs are plentiful at Punta Cormoran. © 2011

Floreana

Floreana (also named Charles and Santa Maria) is one of the two southernmost islands in the Galápagos, along with Española to the east, and it is the sixth largest island in the archipelago. One of the older volcanic islands, it has an uneven profile that is the result of numerous volcanoes and parasitic cones in advanced stages of erosion that are now covered in a palo santo (*Bursera graveolens*) forest. These trees turn green during the rainy season, but for most of the year they are leafless and gray, a stark contrast to the red/brown surface of the extinct volcanic cones.



There is a wide powdery, snow-white sand beach on the eastern side of Punta Cormoran. © 2011

This island is generally considered to be the first island in the archipelago inhabited by humans. It was colonized in the 1800's and has an unusual, checkered past. Even earlier, at the end of the 18th century, a post office barrel was set up on Floreana where sailors would deposit mail for collection by ships returning to their home ports. The small settlement that was established in the early 1800's, later became a penal colony. Then, between 1924 and 1932, a number of immigrants from Norway and Germany settled on the island. A series of strange deaths and disappearances ensued and there are some interesting books written about their intriguing histories. Margaret Wittmer, the last survivor of these original settlers, died at the age of 95 in the year 2000. Today there are several families residing in Puerto Velasco Ibarra, the only settlement on the island. This little community consists of two small hotels, The **Pension Wittmer**, which has several guest rooms and bungalows

overlooking a beach, and the **Red Mangrove Lava Lodge**, which has ten ocean front pine cabins.



Dusk at Brown Beach on the west side of Punta Cormoran. © 2009

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Punta Cormoran

turtles (seasonal), flamingo lagoon, beaches

Location: North Shore of Floreana

Access: Wet landing

Difficulty: Easy 1-hour walk, some inclines, dirt trail and sand

Punta Cormoran (sometimes spelled Cormorant), named after a U.S. naval vessel, is the main land visit on the island. It is located on the North Shore near Devil's Crown. The wet landing is on a long sandy beach, tinted green by the high concentration of green olivine crystals. A trail 400m (1300ft) long leads

across the isthmus, past a mangrove lagoon, to a wide beach with powdery, snow-white sand on the eastern side of the point. Swimming is now forbidden at the beach because it is a nesting and haul out site for green turtles from December through March. Female green turtles can occasionally be found on the beach during other times of the year. They drag themselves up on the beach to rest in the surf line, running a gauntlet of over-zealous, prospective male suitors patrolling just offshore. It is interesting to note that the male sea turtles do not come on shore, because their fore flippers lack the strength to move once they leave the water. Stingrays and white-tipped reef sharks are also seen in the shallows. The beach is literally covered with ghost crabs that duck into their holes in the sand upon the approach of visitors. Large Sally lightfoot crabs scurry across the lava fingers in the center of the beach.



A young sea lion at Brown Beach © 2009

There are several vantage points to view the residents of a nearby brackish lagoon, located along the trail between the two beaches. One of the largest

populations of flamingoes in the Galápagos resides in this lagoon. The adults parade about in the shallows on their spindly legs, scooping up brine shrimp and other goodies, including an assortment of aquatic insects, from the murky water. Adult flamingoes are pinkish in color while the juveniles are generally white. These stately birds are very skittish; however, they frequently allow you to approach within 5-10m (16-32ft), sometimes permitting exceptional reflection images as they amble about the still waters of the lagoon. This area also offers an opportunity to view other wading birds, including stilts, whimbrels, pintails and ruddy turnstones.



The make shift mail receptacles at Post Office Bay are in a state of constant change. © 2009

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Post Office Bay

beach, post office barrels, lava tubes

- Location:** North Shore of Floreana, west of Punta Cormoran
- Access:** Wet landing
- Difficulty:** Easy walk, climbing, wading, increased difficulty due to lava tubes

This small bay is a short distance to the west of Punta Cormoran, near Brown beach. The beach has a wet landing and is primarily a site of historical interest. British sailors left a large wooden barrel here in 1793 to allow visitors to leave messages and mail to be picked up and carried away by homeward-bound ships. This tradition continues through to the present day, though the mail receptacle has been changed frequently over the years. Tourists often leave mail addressed to friends and relatives, to see if the process actually works. Rumor has it that pieces of mail occasionally arrive at their destination years later. From personal experience, mail occasionally arrives home before the sender.

Some 300m (1000ft), or a 10-minute walk beyond the "mail drop" is a lava tube that is entered through a hole in the flat ground. It is a short 5m (15ft) descent via a wooden stairway to the first level spot. You can walk for a short distance and then navigate further by wading and "half swimming" to the end of the cave. This excursion is fairly difficult and takes about an hour.

Asilo de la Paz, the source of fresh water on Floreana, is situated in the highlands about an hour by bus or 8km (5mi) from Puerto Velasco Ibera harbor. The site is little more than a hollowed out area in a cliff, where water seeps through cracks. Residents collect the water in various receptacles, which are placed to capture the precious liquid as it drips from the rocks. It is a mystery as to how pirates long ago discovered this fresh water source.



A sea lion pup watches our landing from behind an algae encrusted lava rock © 2009

Baroness Lookout-Floreana

Here you will find an elevated slope from which you can enjoy a beautiful vista at the Baroness Lookout. It is said that Baroness Eloisa von Wagner loved this place and spent several hours watching the horizon. Within walking distance (30 m) are the ruins of what is known as her House. From this lookout, the landscape covers the coastline from the Enderby islet to Post Office Bay, as well as Cerro Pajas, the pool of flamingos and a wide forest of Palo Santo.

Snorkel Site

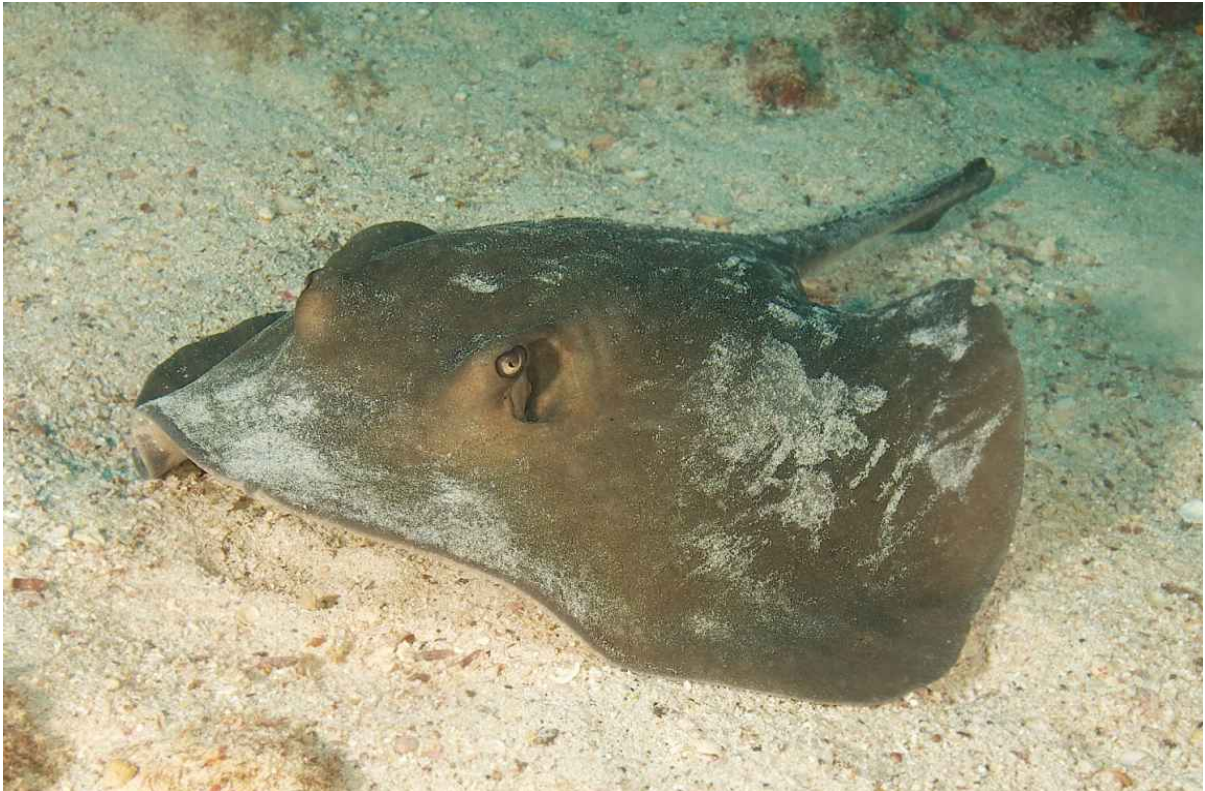
Devil's Crown

rays, schools of fish, octopus, white-tipped reef sharks

Location: Northeast coast of Floreana

Depth Range: 6-24m (20-80ft)

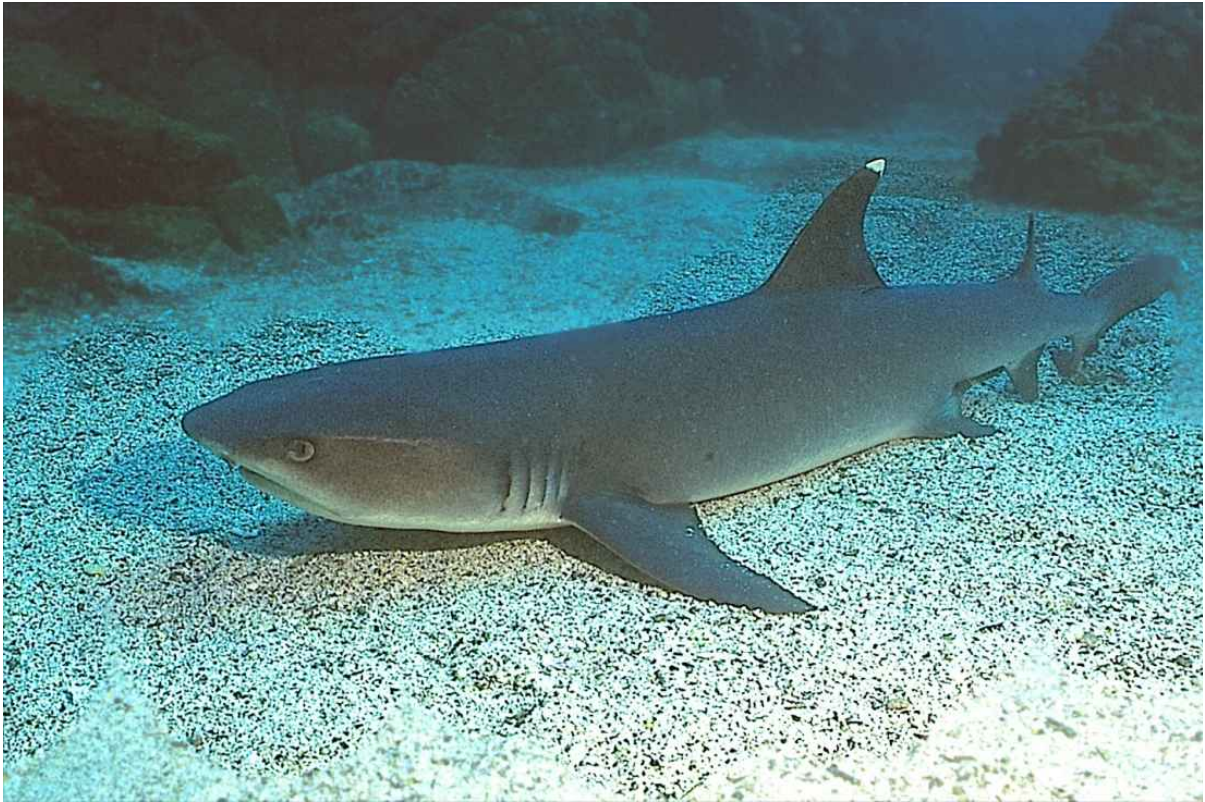
Visibility: 10-18m (30-60ft)
Current: Moderate to heavy
Surge: Moderate



Diamond rays can be seen on shallow, sandy patches inside the crater at the Devil's Crown. © 2011

Devil's Crown, also known as Onslow Island, is the partially exposed cone of an extinct volcano located only 250m (820ft) offshore from Floreana. The relatively shallow site, north of Floreana, is also just offshore from Punta Cormoran. The area was named "Corona Del Diablo" (Devil's Crown) because the sections of the partially eroded tuff cone protruding from the water are shaped like a crown. The center of the "crown," consisting of little more than sand and rubble, is very shallow - only 2-5m (5-15ft) and the site is actually on the outer edge of the north section of the cone. The seabed between Devil's Crown and Punta Cormoran is only 9m (30ft) deep. Currents normally come

from the east or southeast, wrapping around the cone. They are usually moderate, but can be very strong on occasion.



White-tipped reef sharks can be seen resting on the bottom in depths from 6-9m (20-30ft). © 2009

Begin the from the east side of the crater. The outer edge is a vertical wall to a depth of 6-9m (20-30ft). Along the first third of the back wall, the bottom is a jumble of rocks and boulders that slope away from the crater and cascade to a gently sloping sand and rubble bottom, gradually slipping into deeper water. Patches and fingers of sand between rocky areas hide large diamond rays and marble rays. Schools of large yellowtail snapper, barberfish and grunts frequently congregate here.

A tunnel in the middle of the crater wall that passes through to the shallow center of the cone is an interesting place to investigate when the ocean is calm and the currents are weak. The outer entrance to the tunnel is 5-6m (15-20ft) deep, so it is too deep for most snorkelers. An interesting variety of marine life

parades through the tunnel, including white-tipped reef sharks and yellowtail surgeonfish. As you work your way around the outer edge of the crater, you will encounter several massive pinnacles, some of which break the surface. They sit on the bottom at 9-15m (30-50ft). Extending from the center of the outer crater wall is a ridge roughly formed by large rocks that descend into deep water along the back slope. It is common to encounter pelagics, including eagle rays, sharks and turtles here. Water temperature on this end of Floreana is in the mid-to-high 20's Celsius (70's Fahrenheit) in the wet season and in the lower 20's Celsius (70's Fahrenheit) in the garua "Dry" season.



The marine iguanas at Punta Suarez, displaying bright red markings, are the most colorful marine iguanas found in the Galápagos. © 2006

Española (Hood)

The southernmost island in the Galápagos, volcanic Española is about 61sq km (38 sq. mi) in size and oriented from east to west. The island is almost oval

shaped with a flattish, steep and rocky south coast and a rounder northern side. Espanola has two of the best land excursions in the entire archipelago. The first is Gardner Bay, a long, powdery white sand beach on the northeast corner of the island that is home to a sea lion colony and offers excellent swimming. A short distance off the beach is a small islet called Islote Gardner (Gardner Island), which is an excellent snorkeling location. The second land visit is Punta Suarez on the northwest point of Española. It is one of the best visitation sites in the archipelago because of the great diversity and abundance of land and sea birds, including the amazing waved albatross and the Española mockingbird.



A marine iguana strolls along the beach at Bahia Gardner. © 2009

Española has a rich variety of fauna, including some species that are quite different from their brethren on other islands and two endemic species - the waved albatross, which only nests there in the dry season (mid-March or April to mid-December), and the Española mockingbird, whose beak is longer than

that of its cousins. The unique marine iguanas here are the largest and most colorful in the archipelago and the island has large colonies of blue-footed and Nazca boobies. Other birds often seen here include: Galápagos American oystercatchers, swallowtail gulls, lava and night herons, Galápagos hawks, Galápagos doves, and three kinds of Darwin finches - small ground, warbler and large cactus.



A sea lion takes a break from his snooze to check out visitors trespassing on his beach. © 2009

Land Tour Visitation Site

Gardner Bay (Bahia Gardner)

white sand beach, sea lion colony

Location: NE shore of Espanola/Hood Island

Access: Wet landing

Difficulty: Wet landing, easy beach stroll

Visitors can explore the wide, 2km (1.2mi) beach on their own, as there is no formal trail here. The soft white, powdery sand, bordered by saltbush and mesquite, is full of sea lion pups and curious Española mockingbirds. What appear to be a scattering of rounded boulders are actually dozing sea lions or the occasional green turtle resting after laying her eggs, or seeking refuge on the beach. The sea lion antics, together with the exceedingly picturesque setting, make this a terrific location for photography. Shorebirds like Galápagos American oystercatchers, sanderlings and wandering tattlers walk along the surf line. Yellow warblers flit among the palo santo trees behind the beach and you can see the Galápagos hawks and three types of finches - the large cactus finch, small ground finch, and the Darwin's warbler finch. Look for lava lizards in the brush (the females are the colorful ones here and the males have prominent black spots). Swim with sea lions right from the beach, explore the bay and islets by kayak or just relax on the beach.



The sea lions can be very playful at Islote Gardner. © 2009

Snorkel Site

Islote Gardner

sea lions, batfish, walls, caves

Location: Northeast side of Española

Depth Range: Surface-24m (0-80ft)

Visibility: 15-18m (50-60ft)

Current: Slight

Surge: Moderate in shallows

Islote Gardner, just off the northeast coast of Española, is lined with vertical cliffs that disappear beneath the sea. From above, the islet has the appearance of a round coin that has been bitten in two, leaving a jagged edge on its

western shoreline. The prevailing current at Gardner Island comes from the east or southeast, and it can occasionally come from the northwest; however, most of the time, this site is protected from current by the islet. Underwater, this site has mini-walls that drop to sand ledges and the tops of boulder slopes between 9-12m (30-40ft).



White-tipped reef sharks can be found in shallow sand areas tucked into recesses in the reef. © 2009

Generally, there is very little current at Isote Gardner. When there is some current you have a better chance of seeing pelagics, such as hammerhead and white-tipped reef sharks. Schools of snappers, creolefish and king angelfish frequent this area. Large parrotfish, barberfish, schools of butterfly fish, large pufferfish can be seen here. The larger, darker-colored marble rays are frequently seen resting among the rocks, while their cousin, diamond stingrays, prefer to partially cover themselves in the sand.

Near the surface, the rock wall is adorned with pencil urchins, short-spined green urchins and tubastrea. If you get all the way to the southern end of the

island, look for the large, shallow area where several playful sea lions allow you to join in a game of tag.



A waved albatross and her chick hide in the middle of the trail at Punta Suarez. © 2011

Land Tour Visitation Site

Punta Suarez

waved albatross, booby birds, marine iguanas

Location: West end of Española/Hood Island

Access: Cement jetty or boulders; or wet landing on beach

Difficulty: Long walk, sturdy shoes

Punta Suárez is on the west end of Española. This hike is one of the longer 4km (2.5mi) and more strenuous ones in the islands; however, it is also one of the most extraordinary. It starts with a tricky dry landing on a rocky

breakwater, or if the ocean is too rough, “Plan B” is a wet landing on a small crescent-shaped beach crammed with sea lions. The soulful-looking pups are calling for their mothers. Large, dark boulders ring the beach and you will immediately see a welcoming committee of large red and green Marine iguanas. You will be maneuvering over and around large boulders and hiking on rough trails for much of the circuit, so wear sturdy shoes.

Keep away from the Española Mockingbird. Contact with visitors has already altered the Mockingbird behavior and Park personnel are concerned because it could have a detrimental effect on their long-term survival. They are definitely used to humans and seem to be looking for handouts. Although you might think it is “cute,” it is important that you do not feed them, touch them, or give them water.



The birds on Punta Suarez love to get their pictures taken. © 2006

The trail heads south through vegetation that includes saltbush and palo santo trees, then leads to the waved albatross colony in a flat area in the middle

of the island. The albatrosses are definitely a highlight of the excursion and a great reason to visit Española. It is exciting and entertaining to watch these huge birds literally launch themselves off the cliffs, and their 'crash' landings are pretty amusing. Their theatrical mating displays are well worth the price of admission, but there is not one to be seen from December through March when they are all out to sea.

The marked trail then leads back along the southern cliffs that drop dramatically to the water's edge. In places the trail drops to rock piles near the water's edge. There are spectacular views of the sea and a blowhole with water shooting high up above the rocks and remarkable red-billed tropicbirds cruise the skies, their two long tail feathers twice the length of their bodies. Here you will also see swallowtail gulls, lots of the colorful red and green marine iguanas, some large lava lizards, and innumerable beautiful Nazca boobies with their distinctive long beaks and dark masks, busy with the process of building nests. "Nest" is a relative term here, as it seems that all they do is pick out a spot, spray some guano in a circle, drop a few twigs, and then lay an egg and sit there. The little balls of fluff that are newly hatched chicks will captivate you. The return path winds inland among the nests of blue-footed boobies.



Many of the live-aboards meet their guests at Wreck Bay in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on the island of San Cristobal. © 2014

San Cristobal

San Cristóbal (also called Chatham) was named to honor the patron saint of sailors. At 558sq km (215sq mi), it is the fifth largest island in size, has the second-largest population, houses a naval base, and is the easternmost island in the Galápagos. It has the only permanent stream in the Galápagos, mysterious freshwater lakes, and it is where Darwin first went ashore in 1835.

Traditionally, the majority of the thousands of inhabitants have been fishermen, but the growth of tourism is opening up new possibilities. The Chatham Mockingbird is an endemic species found nowhere else in the world, but it can be seen throughout the island.

San Cristóbal is composed of two coalesced volcanoes. The older, southwestern half is a symmetric shield volcano made up of gently dipping lava capped by a thick, deeply-weathered pyroclastic blanket and numerous

satellite cinder cones. The northeastern half displays more recent flows that are only a few centuries old.



Taxi Boats and inflatables transfer tourists between their live-aboards and the pier in town. © 2013

Puerto Baquerizo Moreno

Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, the provincial capital of the Galápagos and the second largest tourist hub after Puerto Ayora, sits at the southwestern corner of the island, on Wreck Bay, where sea lions lounge nonchalantly on the decks of anchored fishing boats and have taken over park benches. It is growing and increasing in importance because of its airport and the fact that many of the tour yachts and ships operate out of the port. Although there are far fewer tourist facilities and services than in Puerto Ayora, it still has all the facilities and services of a small town - a tourist information office, small hospital, bank, post office, international telephone center, some shops, stores and small markets, hotels, and schools. While there are a few places with Internet access,

the connection is generally slow and service costs a little more than in Puerto Ayora. The selection of lodgings is more limited, too, but there are enough restaurants, bars, and discos with live music open at night to keep you happy.



Trails on Frigatebird Hill offer interesting interactions. © 2011

A Charles Darwin Research substation was built in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno in 1998. The facility is open to the public and consists of five offices for administration: Marine biology, entomology, environmental education, communication, and agriculture, plus a reception area, with space for support staff and the staff room/classroom. The environmental education center in an adjoining building is shared by both school and community groups for environmental education programs. It has an excellent reference library.

Things to See and Do in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno

Museum

There is a small Natural History museum with a statue of Darwin in front. It is located next to the Franciscan mission in the center of town and exhibits a good range of Galápagos animals, plants, and minerals. Ask to see Pepe, a giant tortoise that has lived there more than 80 years. Hours are Monday through Saturday 8am-12pm and 3pm-6pm.

Cinema

Cine Naval, currently the only movie theater in the archipelago, is located within the naval zone but is open to the public. In July, San Cristobal hosts a cinema festival under the auspices of the Spanish government. It screens both Ecuadorian and Latin American films. Movies are shown outside in the open air at Playa Mann, when the weather is good (which is most of the time).

The Interpretation Center

The Galápagos National Park visitor center is a modern facility with displays explaining the biology and human history of the islands. It opened on the north side of town in 1998. The center presents educational interactive ecology events and videos in English and Spanish. They give a complete, documented history of the archipelago, its ecosystems, flora and fauna. The main hall gallery has an outdoor theater and organizes rotating exhibits as well as cultural activities like theater, exhibitions and workshops on dance and painting. Entrance is free. Hours are 7am-12pm and 1:30pm-5pm daily. The grounds are full of cacti and local flora that are accessed from boardwalks.



A sea lion shows his appreciation to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno for erecting benches in the downtown area near the port. © 2013

Cerro de las Tijeretas (Frigatebird Hill) Connected to the Interpretation Center by a system of foot trails that have Sun decks and beautiful views along the way, the extensive site is a short 1.5km (1mi) walk Southeast of town that passes through a forest of palo santo trees. You can go there without a guide for a panoramic view of the Bay and town below. It was named because both species of frigatebird used to nest there and you can still see some of them, as well as nesting blue-footed boobies, but the numbers are decreasing, perhaps because of the growing human population nearby.

Puerto Grande

Puerto Grande is a well-protected little cove on the northwestern coast that has a good, sandy beach suitable for swimming. Various seabirds are seen there regularly



Marine iguanas can be found at La Loberia sunning on the rocks. © 2013

Beyond Puerto Baquerizo Moreno

La Loberia

La Loberia, is a long stretch of coast with colonies of sea lions and marine iguanas that is also close to town and good for swimming and surfing at high tide all year round. The male sea lions may be aggressive, so be careful.

El Progreso

This village in the Highlands, about 8km (5mi) east of the capital on good road, was established in 1879 as a Hacienda Progreso, a large sugar refinery whose history includes harsh conditions and two assassinations. The area around El Progreso is a nice, cool place to go for a relaxing meal and on weekends you'll find lots of locals there. The oldest surviving settlement in the Galápagos, it sits at the base of the 896m (2940ft) Cerro San Joaquin, the highest point on San Cristóbal.



Darwin's finches, thirteen varieties in all, can be seen throughout the islands. © 2013

El Junco lagoon

About 10 km (6.5mi) from El Progreso, on a dirt road, is one of the few permanent bodies of fresh water in the Galápagos. Not really a lagoon, the lake is about 700m (2,300ft) above sea level. At this elevation, the weather is often misty or rainy, perfect conditions for highland miconia vegetation and endemic tree ferns. On the 20 min. walk around the Lake, look for white-cheeked pintail ducks and common gallinules.



Large tortoises roam the grounds at the La Galapaguera Reserve on San Cristobal Island. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff La Galapaguera

This reserve is in the highlands, near Cerro Colorado, about 22 km (14mi), a 40 min. bus ride, east of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. It was built to protect the threatened San Cristóbal population of giant tortoise (*Geochelone chatamensis*) in an environment similar to its natural habitat, which is not accessible to tourists. A visitor center conveys an overview of the natural history of these surreal animals. Facilities include an interpretation hall, conference room, souvenir shop, bar, offices, a tortoise rearing center (including a herpetology laboratory and growing corrals), and interpretive trails in a semi-natural environment.

Originally, there were two tortoise populations on San Cristóbal, but the southern one was wiped out by the whalers. The tortoises in the reserve come from the northern group, which is continuously in serious danger from

introduced animals such as feral goats, rats and cats. These tortoises mate once a year and females lay 12 -16 eggs each time, with an incubation period of 90 to 110 days.

Wooden foot-bridges and stairs link the trails, which have explanatory signs in English as well as Spanish. It is one of the few places to see the Calandrina Galapagosa, an endemic plant of San Cristóbal. Along the trails, look for San Cristobal mockingbirds which are also endemic, yellow warblers, small ground finches, tree finches and flycatchers, and other native and endemic plants such as the prickly ash, manchineel (don't touch this one, it's highly toxic), matazrno, romerillo, daisy tree, crotons, acacias and guayabillo trees. If you go to the center on your own, guides from the National Park will show you around.

Cerro Brujo

This is a beautiful white coral beach, considered one of the most spectacular in Galapagos. It is a perfect place for a peaceful walk with expansive views and good bird watching. Here you can snorkel or kayak from the beach or swim with sea lions as well as take a Zodiac ride.



A young sea lion plays at the surface, leaving a trail of bubbles. © 2006

Snorkel Site

Cueva De Los Lobos sea lion cave

Location: Cave directly below Cerro de las Tijeretas

Access: Boat

Difficulty: Easy snorkel, but only access by boat

Cueva de los Lobos (sea lion cave) is a secluded cove directly below Cerro de los Tijeretas (Frigatebird Hill). A great spot for snorkeling, it is lined with caves full of cavorting sea lions.



Sea lions snuggle on the shoreline at Isla Lobos off the west coast of San Cristobal. © 2007

Land Tour Visitation Site

Isla Lobos

boobies, frigatebirds, sea lions

Location: Small islet Off West Coast of San Cristóbal

Access: Wet landing

Difficulty: Easy trail, but wear sturdy shoes

Isla Lobos is a small island located on the southwest coast of San Cristóbal, midway between Wreck Bay and Point Basso. From the protected anchorage, you can look over the top of Isla Lobos and see Kicker Rock in the distance. The brief, 30 to 45 minute, land visit will take you over a short, but rocky trail only about 300m (980ft) long. There is a large colony of sea lions that can be found lounging on the rock-strewn shoreline or relaxing in the shade of

saltbush or palo santo trees. Blue-footed boobies make their sparse nests on the ground, while frigatebirds nest in the branches of the diminutive forest. Squadrons of birds can often be seen dive bombing schools of baitfish in the shallows near the northeastern end of the island.

Snorkel site

Isla Lobos

sea lion colony, rays

Location:	Off West Coast of San Cristóbal
Depth Range:	3-9m (10-30ft)
Visibility:	6-12m (20-40ft)
Current:	Usually light
Surge:	Negligible



A sea lion pup checks out a snorkeler from the safety of the rocky shoreline at Isla Lobos. © 2013

Isla Lobos is a small, rocky islet located about an hour north of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno by boat. The narrow channel, formed between the island and the coastline of San Cristóbal, is a popular, well-protected snorkel site.

Isla Lobos translates to “Island of the Sea wolves,” and, as the name suggests, there are plenty of sea lions. A fairly large sea lion colony resides on the boulder slope on the shoreline of the islet. Young sea Lions playing “hide and seek” slip in and out of the water from the worn boulders and provide great entertainment interacting with snorkelers.

The slope drops down to a sand and rubble bottom that is 10-12m (30-40ft) deep in most places. On the sand are fields of sand dollars, a number of diamond rays, a variety of puffers, and countless sea stars. Visibility is normally about 12m (40ft).

Kicker Rock

Leon Dormido, aka Kicker Rock, is a vertical tuff cone formation that rises abruptly almost 500 feet out of the ocean. This is an incredibly beautiful geologic formation and offers dramatic photo opportunities. As your yacht motors around this unique formation, you can spot Blue-footed Boobies, Nazca Boobies and Magnificent Frigate birds high on the cliffs.



Kicker Rock, also known as Leon Dormido, is an impressive geological formation. © 2006

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkel Site

Punta Pitt

view all three species of boobies

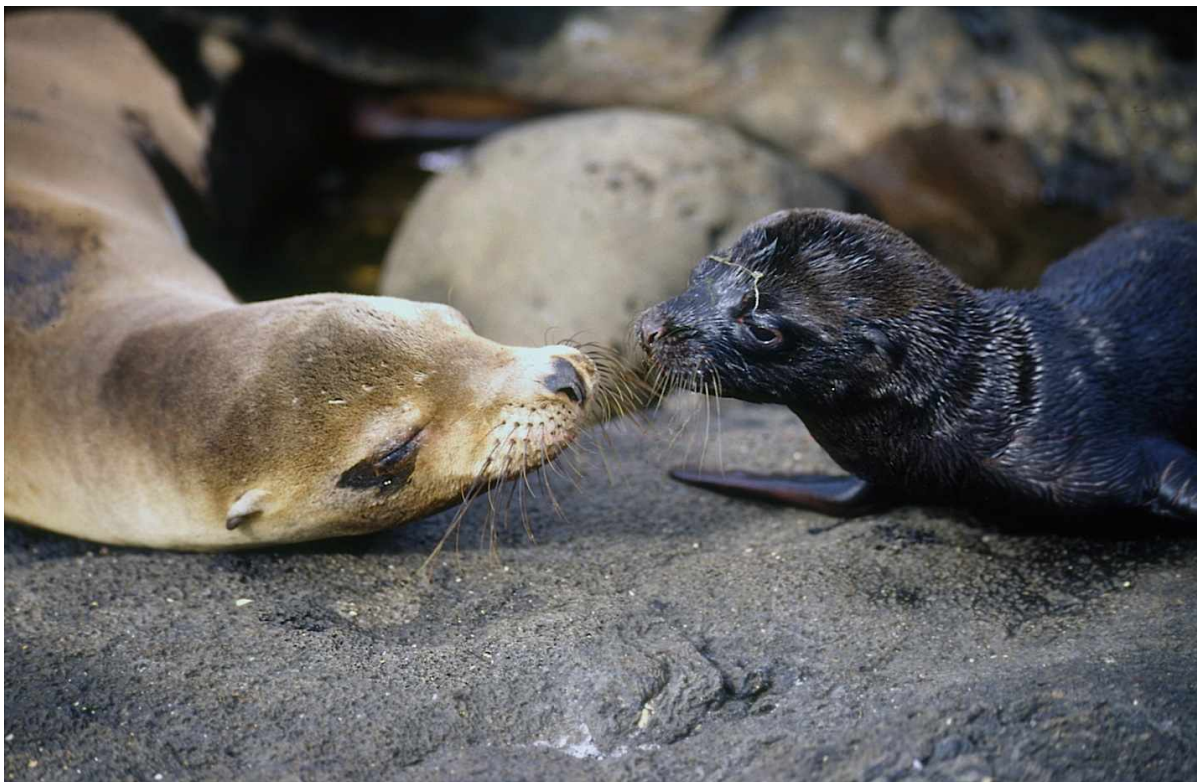
- Location:** North tip of San Cristobal
- Access:** Wet landing
- Difficulty:** Steep, 'up and down' trails (strenuous climb)

Punta Pitt is a worthwhile excursion at the extreme northeast corner of San Cristobal, especially because visitors there can see all three species of boobies that are found in the Galápagos. The wet landing is on a greenish sand beach nestled between towering tuff cones. Sea lions greet new visitors, while marine iguanas bask on the warm sand. The trail from the edge of the beach leads up the side of an eroded volcanic cone. It is a fairly, strenuous climb, but the views from the top are worth the effort.

Sea lions and marine iguanas are plentiful here. Although the blue-footed, red-footed, and Nazca boobies all nest at Punta Pitt, their numbers are not as abundant as elsewhere. It is also possible to see both of the Frigatebird species, swallowtail gulls, and storm petrels.



Both species of Frigatebirds can be found at Punta Pitt. © 2006



A sea lion mother nuzzles her new-born pup. © 2009

Chapter Seven

Northeastern Islands

Genovesa

Land Tour Sites

[Genovesa](#)

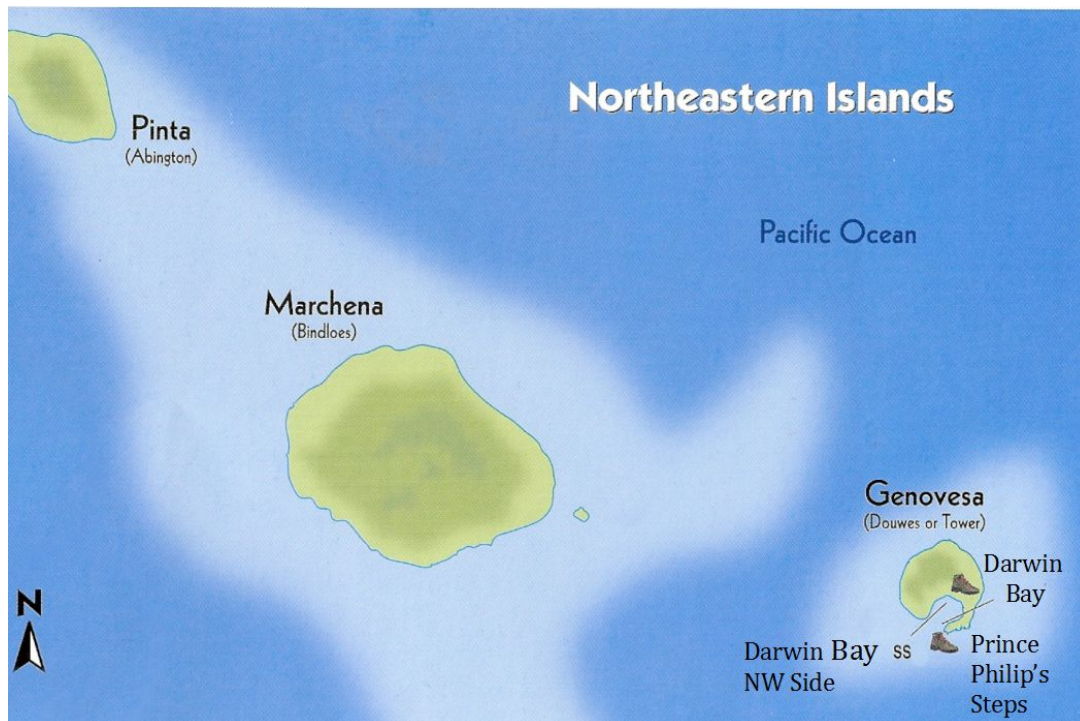
[Darwin Bay](#)

[Prince Philip's Steps](#)

Snorkel Sites

[Genovesa](#)

[Darwin Bay](#)



Northeastern Islands Map © 2014

Genovesa (also named Tower)

Sometimes referred to as the “Bird Island,” Genovesa is a superb visitation area. This remote island has some of the most unchanged, well-preserved wildlife in the Galápagos, which can be attributed to several factors. First of all, they never had human settlements and secondly, the island is far enough away from the central islands that it is not a regular stop for many touring cruise yachts. Also, it is too far away for day trips, and thus it is rarely visited. If you have to make a choice between two comparable naturalist live-aboard cruises, and only one includes Genovesa, I suggest that you take that one!

Genovesa is the island that is the furthest northeast in the archipelago and the only one entirely north of the equator where visitors can go ashore. It is one of the most fascinating islands to visit because of the diversity and sheer numbers of birdlife. Also, it is one of the most pristine in the chain and almost surely has no introduced species because so few boats make the trip there due to its remoteness.



A Red-footed booby at Genovesa © 2009 Ken Weemhoff

The fairly flat, round, 14sq km (9sq mi) horseshoe-shaped island is the rim of an underwater volcano, but unlike most other islands in the Galápagos, is made up of magma rather than basalt. Darwin Bay, the flooded caldera, is partially eroded on its southern edge and open to the sea. This very large, naturally protected harbor is about the size of Academy Bay, with a very deep center that drops to over 186m (over 600ft). Despite the great depths, it has good snorkeling.

Genovesa is a fantastic place to see some of the largest seabird colonies in the Galapagos, including red-footed boobies, Nazca Boobies, great frigatebirds, red-billed tropicbirds, swallowtail gulls, the rare lava gull, and thousands of storm petrels. You can also spot Galápagos doves and short-eared

owls, as well as both sea lions and fur seals on land. Then look to the sky where thousands of soaring birds fly overhead on the thermals.

There are two other islands in the north but **Pinta** has no land sites and **Marchena** is off limits to visitors.



Climbing up the stairway at Prince Philip's Steps. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff

Land Tour Visitation Site

Prince Philip's Steps massive numbers of birds

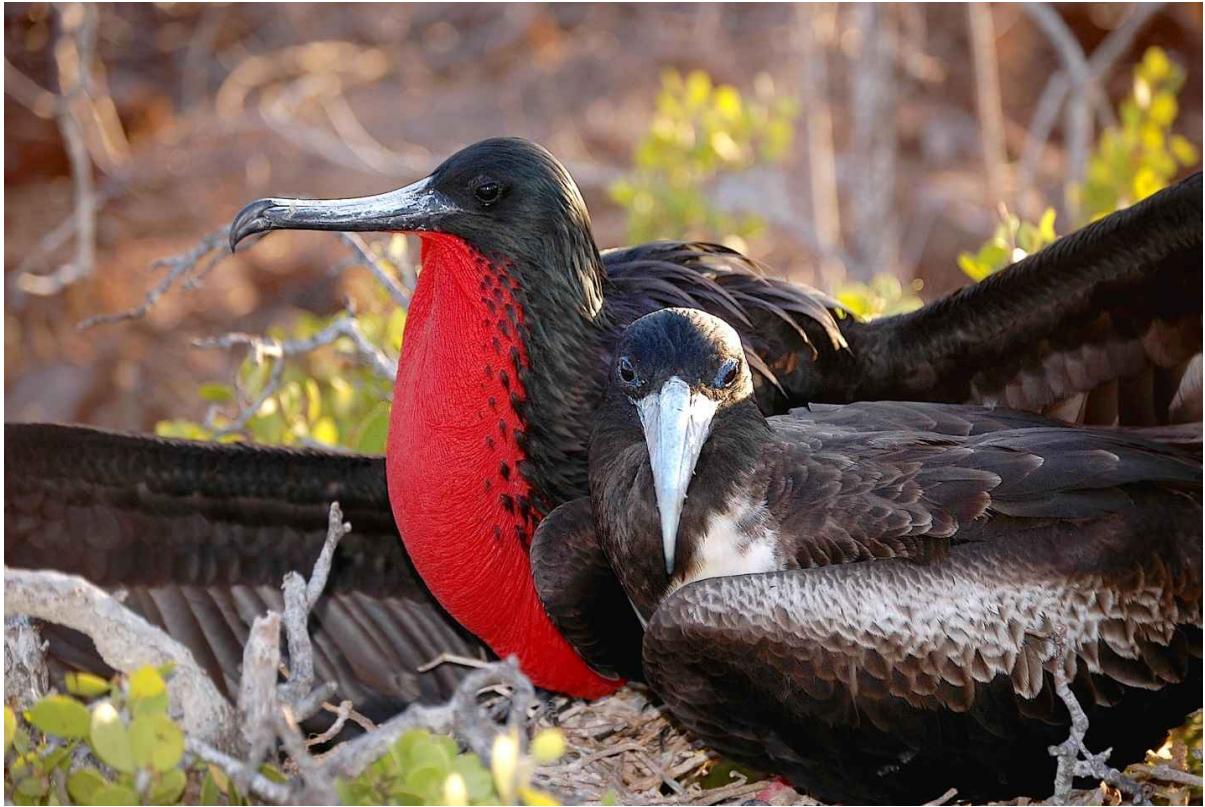
Location: Genovesa, SE side of Darwin Bay

Access: Dry landing & panga ride

Difficulty: Moderate, steep climb at beginning

The land visit at Prince Philip steps, also called El Barranco (The Cliff), starts just inside the southeastern corner of the bay, where some steps have been cut into the cliff at the water level. From there, a steep, rocky path leads about 25m (82ft) up to the arid zone at the top of the cliffs. Upon arriving at the summit, even before catching your breath, you'll immediately see an abundance of red-footed boobies sitting on their nests in the palo santo trees. In contrast, Nazca boobies make their nests (barely more than a scattering of a few sticks, guano, and feathers) right in the middle of the narrow, 1km (0.6mi) - long trail leading inland. Genovesa has some of the largest colonies of Nazca boobies in the archipelago, and they are completely indifferent to the presence of human visitors, even when their fluffy white chicks are young. You will pass some unusual dry-forest vegetation, "incense stick" trees, and more colonies of Nazca boobies on the way to an expanse of cracked lava where thousands of storm petrels and the elusive, rarely seen short-eared owls make their nests. The owls are typically night hunters, but have changed their behavior on Genovesa to be able to hunt their prey, baby storm petrels, which are active during the day.

Frigate birds are fascinating to watch as they soar high overhead with their distinctive long, forked tails, and the male's large, red, balloon-like sac inflated below his neck during mating season. On the trail, you get close enough to these large birds sitting on their nests that you'll be able to admire the gorgeous silvery-green cast to their feathers and their unique, long, thin beaks that turn down at the tip.



A male frigatebird shades the female with his wings. The male is easily distinguished from the female by his bright red throat pouch. © 2009

Frigatebirds

The magnificent frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) and great frigatebird (*Fregata minor*) are the only two members living in the Galápagos, of the five frigate bird species existing worldwide. With exceptionally long wings and a long forked tail, the high-flying frigate has plenty of control while in the air, where it spends much of its time, although it seems to be unable to take off from flat ground and appears to need a running downhill start to fly. The wingspan is more than 1 meter (3 feet) long, but the large bird has relatively small legs and feet. Frigates fly way out over the ocean to forage for food. They are also notorious pirates, stealing food from other birds at every chance.



A male frigatebird soars high looking for a meal. © 2009

During mating season, or about March to June in the Galapagos, male frigatebirds conspicuously inflate a brilliant red neck pouch to attract a mate. They compete with one another, flying above the females on the ground and shaking the neck sack to get attention, and hopefully, end up as the chosen mate. Frigatebirds nest mainly in saltbushes, where you can see them fluttering their long wings with the iridescent feathers as another part of their mating rites. The nests are closer to the trail, so there are better views of the birds on Genovesa, Española, North Seymour, and San Cristóbal. They also nest on Wolf and Darwin, where no one can go ashore, but they are easily spotted flying among the thermals. Visitors see them soaring throughout the archipelago, especially near Floreana, Santa Cruz, and northwest Isabela.

It is extremely difficult to distinguish one species from the other. The magnificent frigatebird males are slightly larger and have a purple sheen on their back feathers, while the great frigatebirds have a greenish sheen on their

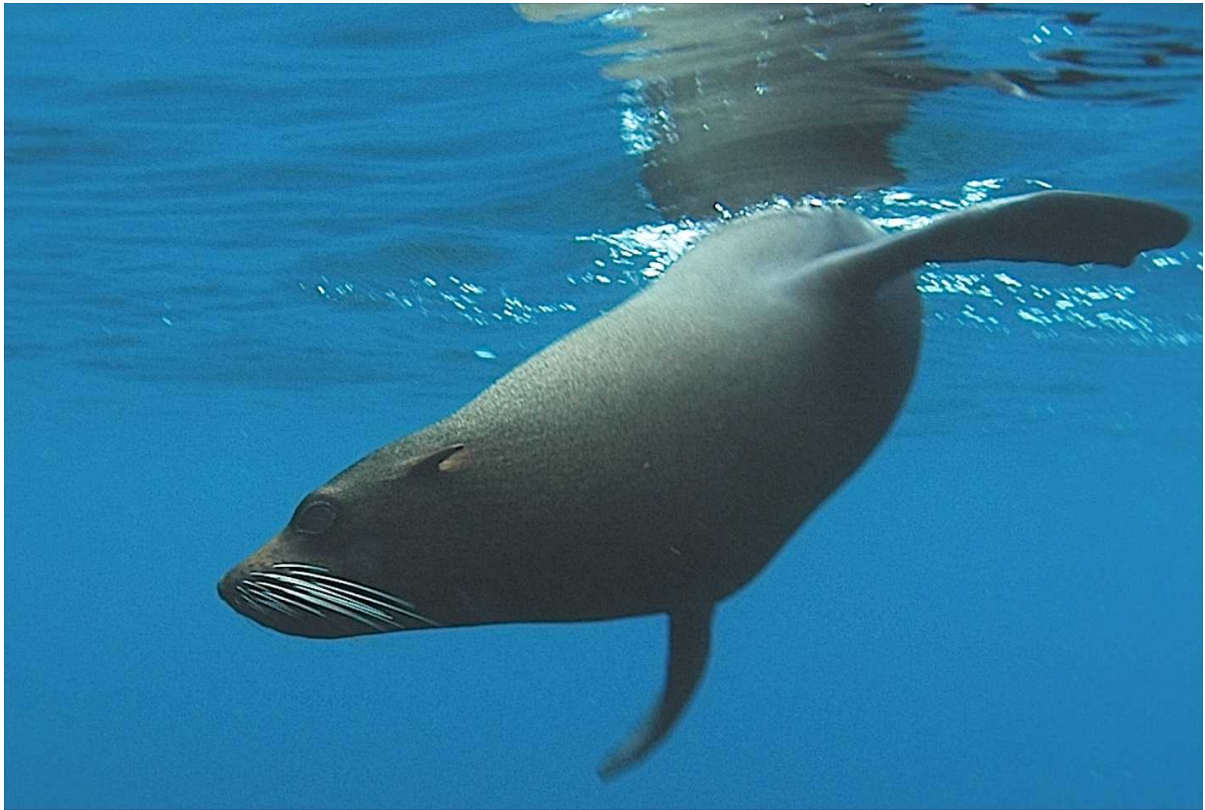
back feathers. The females are easier to recognize. Great frigatebird females have white chests and throats and a red eye ring, while magnificent frigatebird females have a black throat and a blue eye-ring. The great frigatebirds are more commonly sighted.



Nazca Booby sits atop Genovesa. ©2009 Ken Weemhoff

A pleasant panga ride after the hike yields a different perspective of the high cliffs and the birds nesting on them. Sometimes playful sea lions follow the boat and you may see pelicans, brown noddies, Nazca boobies and frigatebirds, perched on the cliffs. If you take the panga ride, which is definitely recommended, be sure to bring a cover to protect yourself and your equipment from drizzle and bird droppings. The Nazca boobies on the lower rocks have quite a projectile range! During the panga ride is it sometimes

possible to see the nocturnal Galapagos Fur Sea Lion who are usually sleeping on the ledges of the cliff.



Galapagos fur sealions are easily recognized by their short stocky bodies, long white whiskers and head down position at the surface. © 2009

Galápagos Fur Sealion (*Arctocephalus galapagoensis*) The Marine mammal sometimes called a fur seal in the Galápagos is actually a species of sea lion, not a true seal, because it has external ear flaps, a long, flexible neck, flexible forelimbs, and hind flippers that can be turned forward for walking on land. It is seen much less frequently than the sea lion and has a soft, thick fur coat compared to the Galápagos sea lion's thinner, coarser, and shorter haired coat. Fur seals prefer a different type of habitat - the steep, rocky, and shaded shorelines. You won't find them on beaches. They live in many parts of the archipelago, including the north end of Cousins Rock, the northeast corner of Darwin, the shallows of Shark Bay on Wolf, Darwin Bay on Genovesa, and James Bay on

Santiago. Often seen floating at the surface in a head down position, they are noticeably smaller and stockier, then the Galápagos sea lions, having rounder faces and shorter snouts, with larger eyes. Fur seals are normally not as playful as their cousins, but they do readily show off their aquatic acrobatic skills. Its thick fur traps air, so they often leave the trail of bubbles streaming behind as they swim. Because of this beautiful coat, they were hunted to the verge of extinction, but after being protected, the population has since recovered.



A guide poses with a friendly sea lion at Darwin Bay. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff

Land Tour Visitation Site

Darwin Bay

three types of boobies, frigatebirds, swallowtail gulls

Location: Genovesa, northern shore of Darwin Bay

Access: Wet landing

Difficulty: Easy walk, beach

Just east of the center of the caldera, on the north shore of Darwin Bay, is a small, white sand beach that is good for swimming and snorkeling after exploring the .75km (0.5mi) area where saltbushes proliferate. Walk to the eastern end of the beach to find Galápagos doves wandering around below short cliffs, where tall opuntia cacti grow out of fissures in the rocks. Heading back along the water's edge, take a short detour. Turn into a treeless area where a short trail ends in a thick red mangrove forest. The forest provides excellent camouflage for host of red-footed boobies nesting there.

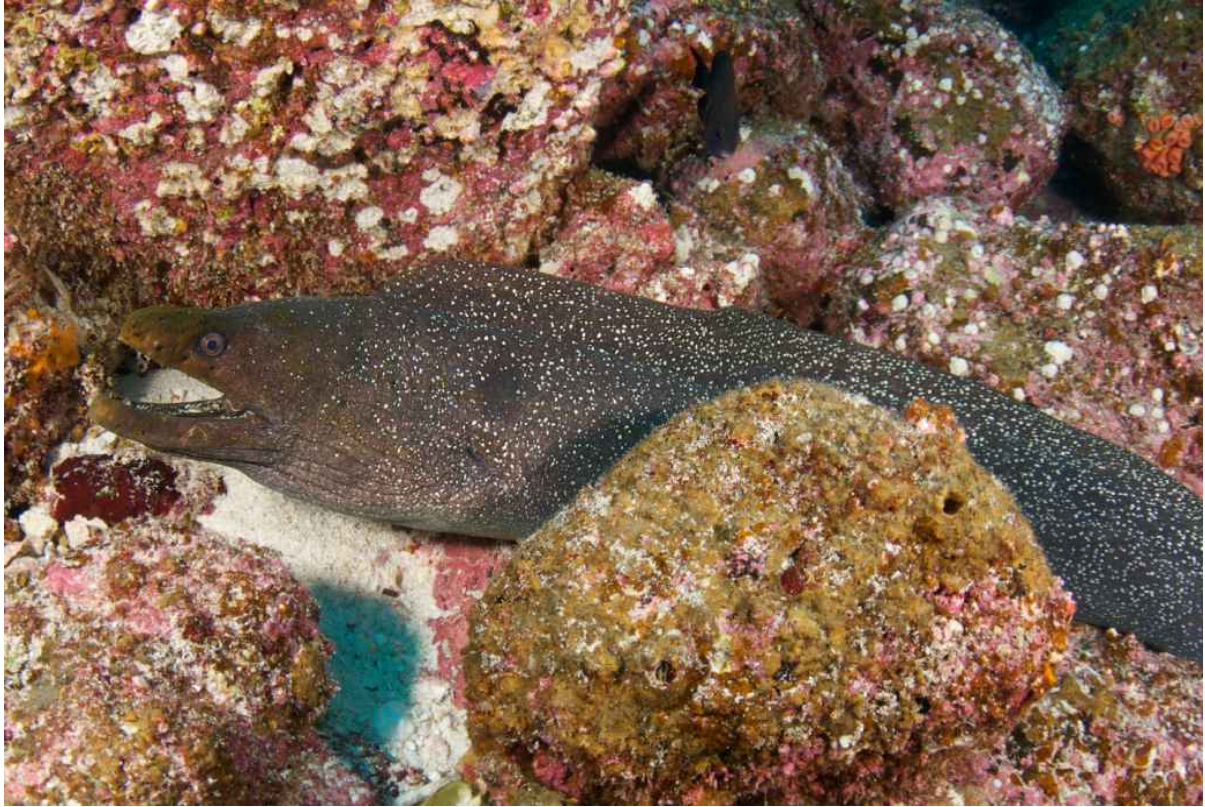


A Swallowtail gull, displaying a distinctive bright red ring around its eye, allows tourists to approach very close. © 2009

Upon returning to the beach, continue west, passing an area where great frigatebirds nest year-round in the thick, dry saltbushes and Nazca boobies nest on the bare ground between the bushes. If you visit in February, you will see the Nazca booby chicks hatching. The great frigatebird males are in full mating plumage from March to June. March and April are the best months to watch courtship behavior. The males sit on the nest and inflate the right red sac on their throats as much as possible, pulling their heads back to show it off to best advantage, and competing with one another to attract the attention of females flying overhead, trying to entice one to choose them as a partner.



At Darwin Bay, you will find a mixture of frigatebirds, swallowtail gulls and boobies, all in the same area. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff At the western end of the beach, during low tide, a small lagoon/tide pool is protected from the sea by a low ridge of lava boulders running parallel to the beach. These rocks are frequented by both lava gulls and swallowtail gulls, the only nocturnal gulls in the world. They have a distinctive red eye-ring. Nearby, a short, narrow path over some smaller rocks leads up to the cliffs. Before that, it skirts a cluster of mangroves where you can see white phase red-footed boobies together with the more common brown phase sitting on their nests among the foliage. Depending on the season, lava gulls may be mating on the ground below, and yellow-crowned night herons come out on the rocks to dry their feathers. Nazca boobies and great frigatebirds also nest in the rocks and bushes at this end, but they are not “friends” with one another and the Nazca boobies will take any opportunity to snatch a weak or injured frigatebird chick. When the tide rises, which can take less than an hour, the whole lowland area is totally covered with water.



It is not unusual to see moray eels in the shallows of Darwin Bay. © 2009

Snorkel Site

Darwin Bay

various tropical fish, moray eels

Location: Inside Darwin Bay

Difficulty: Protected East side of Cove, North Bay surge

The protected waters in Darwin Bay are excellent for snorkeling and kayaking. At Prince Philip's steps on the southeast, you may swim with fur seals and look below for rays. If you prefer to snorkel where it's a bit calmer and shallower, spend time in the northwest part of the bay looking for tropical fish like moorish idols, angelfish, sergeant majors, parrotfish, wrasses, moray eels and sometimes even a small Galápagos shark.



Coastline along northwest Isabela. © 2013

Chapter Eight

Western Islands

Isabella and Fernandina

Land Tour Sites

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Snorkel Sites

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The western islands of Isabella and Fernandina are two of the youngest and the westernmost islands in the archipelago. Although they are only five nautical miles apart near the north of Isabela, across the Bolivar canal, there are huge differences between them and their flora and fauna inhabitants. Depending on the season, there is a good chance of seeing dolphins and whales on the crossing between these islands.



Isabela Map © 2014

Isabela

Isabela is the largest island in the Galápagos. With an area of about 4,588sq km (1,771sq mi) and 132km (82mi) long, Isabela accounts for over 58% of the entire landmass of the archipelago, but only a small portion of the human population (approximately 2,000 people living around Puerto Villamil at the southern end of the island). Shaped roughly like a seahorse facing west and standing on a base, Isabela is still volcanically active. The equator passes across its northern end, just above Cabo Marshall.



Los Tuneles is about a 40 minute speed boat ride from Puerto Villamil. © 2006 Photo by Mathias Espinosa

Isabella contains a chain of five relatively young, sporadically active volcanoes, and a distinct species of giant tortoise has evolved at each one. Volcan Wolf (Wolf Volcano) is the highest point in the islands at about 1,700m (5,577ft). Much of the island had been fertile and green thanks to the frequent mist and fog, providing a good environment for the large numbers of Galápagos tortoises. However, many areas were almost denuded by an out-of-control explosion of introduced goats, causing such a serious threat to the giant tortoises that an eradication program had to be implemented.



Hikers can trek to Volcano Chico, located just northwest of the main crater of Sierra Negra, for incredible views of Fernandina and Northern Isabela. © 2006 Photo by Mathias Espinosa

Puerto Villamil

Puerto Villamil, the only settlement on the island, is a small, laid back, port town, with close to 2,000 residents located on the southeast side of Isabela. In addition to its developing tourism industry, it has a number of commercial enterprises including fishing, sulphur mining, lime production and coffee farming. Emetebe Air, a private airline, provides flights to San Cristobal and Baltra (about \$160 pp one way). Lanchas (speed boat ferries) provide daily shuttle service for passengers to Puerto Ayora (about \$30pp one way for the two and a half hour trip).

The port has a selection of hotels, a few restaurants and several interesting nearby attractions, including beaches, a lagoon with a sizeable population of

flamingos, hikes to the volcanoes, a tortoise breeding center, and snorkeling sites.

Centro de Crianza , the tortoise breeding center is the largest in the archipelago, by far larger than the ones found at Charles Darwin Station on Santa Cruz and at the **Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado National Park** on San Cristobal. Visitors will find some 850 tortoises separated into eight different enclosures and detailed programs on their efforts to boost the populations of Isabella's five subspecies of tortoises.



There is a 6 to 7 hour visit to Las Minas de Azufre (The Sulfur Mines) offering incredible views of the crater. © 2006 Photo by Mathias Espinosa

Captive Breeding Program

In January 2000, Centro de Crianza, a laboratory and captive breeding center for the six sub-species of giant tortoise on Isabella was constructed at the

Charles Darwin Research Station facility in Puerto Villamil. The multi-use building contains Galápagos National Park offices, and Environmental Education Center, and office, and staff accommodations. Currently, there are corrals for adult and young adult tortoises, 18 small corrals for babies, 2 corrals for large or juveniles and 3 incubators that are structured like those at the Santa Cruz facility.

Other tours, which are accessible by land-based operators and located further to the west of the tortoise breeding center, include the Muro de las Lagrimas (Wall of Tears). This wall was built by convicts from a penal colony in the 1940s. Purportedly it had no specific purpose other than as punishment for the inmates, who died building it. I would recommend taking a taxi or include the site as part of a tour to the breeding center.



Muro de las Lagrimas (Wall of Tears). © 2006 Photo by Mathias Espinosa

White-Tipped Reef Shark Canal.

This is a delightful place reached by a comfortable zodiac ride. “Tintoreras” are small islands in front of the Puerto Villamil coast. There are lava heron on the lookout on mangrove branches, Galapagos Penguins and sea lion often pop out on shore. White-tipped reef sharks are fairly common here. Their name in Spanish is Tintorera, thus the name of this site as they are always found here resting in the shallow waters. This area is also called Los Tuneles. The easiest means of getting there is by boat or panga. There is a short trail around the islets, where you can see Sally Lightfoot crabs clambering about the rocks and sea lions, turtles and penguins in and out of the water. This is certainly the best snorkeling spot near the town of Villamil and you must be accompanied by a guide.

The hotel accommodations in Puerto Villamil vary greatly in quality, amenities, and style. Three top-end hotels resorts have recently opened which offer luxury features at a price of \$100 to \$150 per night. There are also low budget and mid-range options.

The Restaurant options include La Choza (Barbequed meats), El Encanto de la Pepa (Ceviche and grilled fish) and Tres Hermanos (set meals and burgers).



**The Sierra Negra crater is the second largest in the world after Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania.
© 2006 Photo by Ken Weemhoff**

Sierra Negra and the Highlands

Sierra Negra is the highest volcano in the archipelago and has the second-largest crater in the world, after the Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania. The last eruption at this crater was in 2005. Hikers can take treks to Volcano Chico, a fissure of lava cones, northwest of the main crater, which offers incredible views of Northern Isabela and Fernandina. There is another trek to Las Minas de Azufre (Sulfur Mines), which takes about 6 or 7 hours, offers spectacular views of the crater and culminates in a descent into the yellow hills of the sulfur mines.

Other Visitor Sites

There are many other visitor sites scattered along the coastline of Isabela. Most of these are only accessible to live-aboard cruise ships.



**Punta Moreno has a handful of brackish ponds frequented by flamingoes in season. © 2006
Photo by Mathias Espinosa**

Punta Moreno

Punta Moreno is a land visit accessible by panga, which is located on the west coast of Isabela, northwest of Puerto Villamil. It has a 2km (1.2mi) hike inland over a pahoehoe lave flow (solidified lava in the form of corrugated or an accordion), which leads to group of brackish ponds. The main attractions are several species of birds which can be found around the lake and mangroves. Flamingoes can be found in the ponds during certain times of the year. There are excellent views of the volcanoes on Isabela. This is an arduous climb so be prepared with good, sturdy hiking shoes.

Elizabeth Bay

Elizabeth Bay is located directly to the east of Punta Moreno, at the base of the seahorse on the southwest side of Isabela. This is only a panga or zodiac ride, because there are no landing sites. It is a secluded cove that is lined with large red mangrove trees where pelicans and herons nest. Here turtles, sea

lions, rays, shore birds, flightless cormorants and giant marine iguanas can be seen. You motor to the rocky islets known as “Las Marielas”, where the largest colony of nesting penguins in the Galapagos Islands is located. Frequently visitors have been able to see Galapagos Hawks soaring overhead while schools of Pompano, Dorado, snook, spotted eagle rays, and golden rays swim below. You will discover a small population of flightless cormorants and marine iguanas in the bay. There is a set of shallow lagoons along the shore and some rocky islets offshore, where you can find a small colony of penguins.



A penguin hangs out with a marine iguana. © 2011

Urbina Bay

Urbina Bay is located on the west coast of Isabela to the north of Elizabeth Bay and across the Bolivar Canal from Fernandina Island. One of the most interesting features of this site was created by a volcanic eruption in 1954, when a chunk of the sea floor including a coral reef was uplifted 20 feet (6 meters) above the surface of the water. During your 2-hour hike you can

observe the corals, bones and shells of marine animals imbedded in the rocky shore. Flightless cormorants and pelicans nest in this area and marine iguanas are scattered along the shoreline.



Section of uplifted coral reef at Urbina Bay. © 2010 Photo by Ken Weemhoff

The far northwest of Isabela is visited by only a few vessels because of the long distance they have to travel to get to the main visitor sites along the west coast, about 200km (124mi) from Santa Cruz. Yachts/ships following longer itineraries occasionally visit Elizabeth Bay, Tagus Cove, Punta Vicente Roca, and Fernandina along the west side of Isabela. Some land and snorkeling tour cruises also call at Tagus Cove, while a few of the larger (and faster) ships go as far south as Urbina Bay and Elizabeth Bay in the middle of the west coast. Special land visits can be arranged to visit Sierra Negra Volcano and Alcedo Volcano.



There is an impressive view from above Darwin Lake looking out over Tagus Cove. © 2009
Photo by Ken Weemhoff

Land Tour Visitation Site

Tagus Cove

panoramic views, flora, penguins

- Location:** West Coast of Isabela
- Access:** Dry landing & panga ride
- Difficulty:** Intermediate hike, includes steep incline

After a dry landing, visitors make their way over some large lava boulders, then walk up a gully, ending back into the recesses above the cove, where the names of historic ships and the dates they visited were carved into the rocks so long ago. Surprisingly, some sonorous and industrious sea lions maneuver their way up here to sleep in the alcoves among the boulders.

The most strenuous part of this visit is the walk up 150 steps on a sturdy wooden stairway. Built by the Galapagos National Park Service, it weaves

upward among the Palo Santo trees to arrive at the rim of the crater. Be prepared for a spectacular view of your live-aboard yacht resting in the cove beyond Darwin's lake, a huge crater filled with greenish water. There is time for some good scenic photography while members of your group catch their breath.



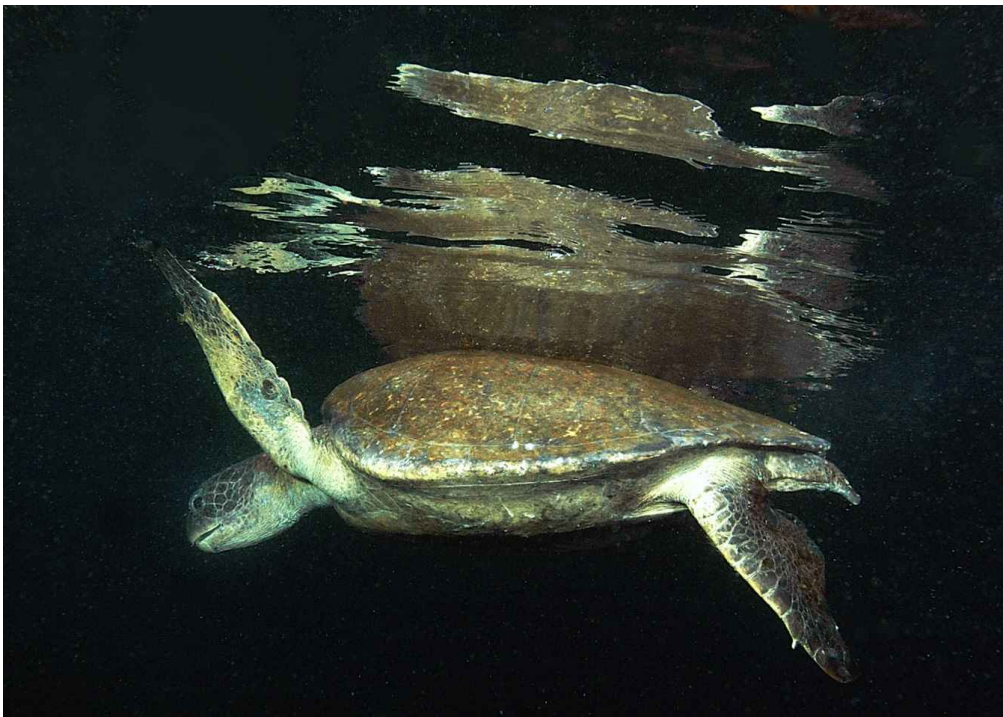
Sea lions are visible throughout the hike. © 2009

The hike continues around the lake on a well-maintained path that is easy to negotiate, but you may have to skirt a few large rocks on the way. You will see many native plants, continually changing views and colors of the lake, and will definitely be tempted by the variety of photo opportunities framed by white-barked dwarf trees. Because of the dry habitat here, many trees appear leafless and almost dead most of the year, except for a short period during the wet season (usually March-April) when the trees are verdant and birds will be difficult to find among the foliage. The rest of the year, many empty bird's nests are clearly visible in the trees. Some of the species you can see (or at least hear) are the woodpecker's Darwin finch, broad-billed anis, flycatchers,

and Galápagos mockingbirds. After going about a third of the way around the lake, a short path leads off to the top of a cinder cone for an even better panorama. The tour reverses direction and returns to the yacht on the same path.

Panga Ride

The brief tour around the cove is an enjoyable way to get closer to penguins and blue-footed boobies ensconced in cubby holes on the craggy rocks. Depending on the conditions, the pangas can get pretty close to the cliffs, where you can pick out many marine iguanas and bright orange flashes of Sally lightfoot crabs scurrying over the rocks.



Turtles are encountered in large numbers in the shallows of Punta Vicente Roca. Here the turtle's reflection can be seen against the surface of the water. © 2009

Ocean Conditions

The waters on the west coast of Isabela and around Fernandina are the coldest in the entire archipelago, averaging a frigid 13°C (56°F). The Cromwell Counter-current (or equatorial undercurrent) is an eastward flowing subsurface

current with an average temperature of 13 degrees C (or 56 degrees F). This current upwells in this area and is responsible for the frigid water temperatures. The good news is that the upwelling that causes these cold-water temperatures also brings up lots of nutrients and oxygen. This in turn results in an abundance of marine life, including a large numbers of dolphins and whales, sometimes mixed in with other species not often seen in the Galapagos.



Mola molas, ocean sunfish, are often seen while snorkeling at Punta Vicente Roca and along the north shore of Fernandina. © 2009

Snorkel and Panga Ride

Punta Vicente Roca

penguins, flightless cormorants, tropical fish, mola mola

Location:	NW coast of Isabela
Average Visibility:	2-5m (5-15ft) surface, 12-24m (beneath thermocline)
Average Current:	None
Surge:	Moderate in the shallows

Punta Vicente Roca is located at the northwest corner of Isabela, due north from Fernandina. Looking at a picture of Isabela, resembling the seahorse, this site is situated just below the snout. There are no landing sites here, so the excursion is a panga ride. There is an incredible amount of marine life in this area. Visitors can see a mixture of sea birds, including boobies, gulls and pelicans perched on the cliffs. Sea lions somehow make the near vertical climb to find comfortable benches along the walls. Flightless cormorants, penguins and marine iguanas are common.



A brown pelican perches on the cliffs close to the water at Punta Vicente Roca. © 2009

For those that brave the chilly water in this area, you will be rewarded with encounters with penguins, turtles, flightless cormorants, marine iguanas and perhaps a mola mola, ocean sunfish. The water is often 15 degrees C (the high 50's Fahrenheit) to 18 degrees C (the low 60's Fahrenheit), so you will need at least a seven mm wetsuit to stay warm. You should check with your live-aboard ship or yacht to find out if they have rental suits they can provide.



A flightless cormorant dries its stubby wings in the breeze on the shoreline at Fernandina. © 2009

Fernandina

The youngest, and still one of the most pristine islands in the archipelago, Fernandina has fresh-looking lava flows stretching around its coast that seem like they might have formed only yesterday. Very few yachts go to Fernandina except on extended cruises, because of its remoteness. The most recent eruption at Fernandina occurred in April of 2009.

So far, the island has not been as affected by the presence of humans as much as some other islands. Some of the abundant indigenous wildlife you can see there includes marine iguanas, lava lizards, sea lion harems, and Sally lightfoot crabs. Bird species include Galápagos hawks, flightless cormorants, lava herons, and the Galápagos American Oystercatcher. There are some tortoises living on the island, but tourists rarely see them. As you travel back and forth between the island and your yacht, keep your eyes peeled for Green sea turtles swimming nearby at the surface.

Land Tour Visitation and Snorkeling Site

Punta Espinosa

marine iguanas, flightless cormorants, penguins

Location: NE corner of Fernandina, West Coast of Isabela

Access: Dry landing (lava may be wet and slippery)

Difficulty: Easy walk on gravelly sand and lava



Tourists join a cluster of marine iguanas sunning themselves at Punta Espinosa. © 2009 Ken Weemhoff

Tours disembark at one of two landing sites close to one another at Punta Espinosa. It's usually a dry landing and either a short walk down a path lined with mangrove trees or a brief trek over the lava flows on the other side of a mangrove-ringed pool to reach the main grayish, rough sand environment

where marine iguanas nest. Thousands of these iguanas, the largest colony in the Galapagos, bask in the sun to warm themselves prior to going into the water to feed on algae. They usually build their nests under cover of the mangroves or in shady patches along the rugged shoreline.

Visitors must be very careful where they step because when the iguanas build their nests (shallow holes in the sand) they do not always stay outside the trails that are clearly marked for humans by the Galapagos National Park Service. Some of the choicest spots for nesting sites appear to be right in the middle of a visitor trail. The trail is defined by short, white-painted sticks stuck intermittently in the sand, but its boundaries are ever-changing, and the sticks are not moved often enough to keep up with the natural changes because of the distance from park service headquarters and the relatively infrequent visitor groups.



A marine iguana feeds on green algae in the rocky shallows at Fernandina. © 2013

Marine iguanas have been around since dinosaurs roamed the earth, and it is fascinating to watch them as they kick up sand to make their nests. Then they aggressively patrol their territory, fighting off interlopers who get too close. Despite these little tiffs, the animals seem to get along with one another quite well, given that they are often seen in groups of ten or more piled one on top of the other. Some of the guides believe that the marine iguanas are the most evolved animals in the Galapagos. As proof, they point out the small hole in top of their heads, which is used for thermo-regulation of their body temperature.



A stunning pair of Galapagos hawks. © 2012 Photo by Dr. Ray Waldner

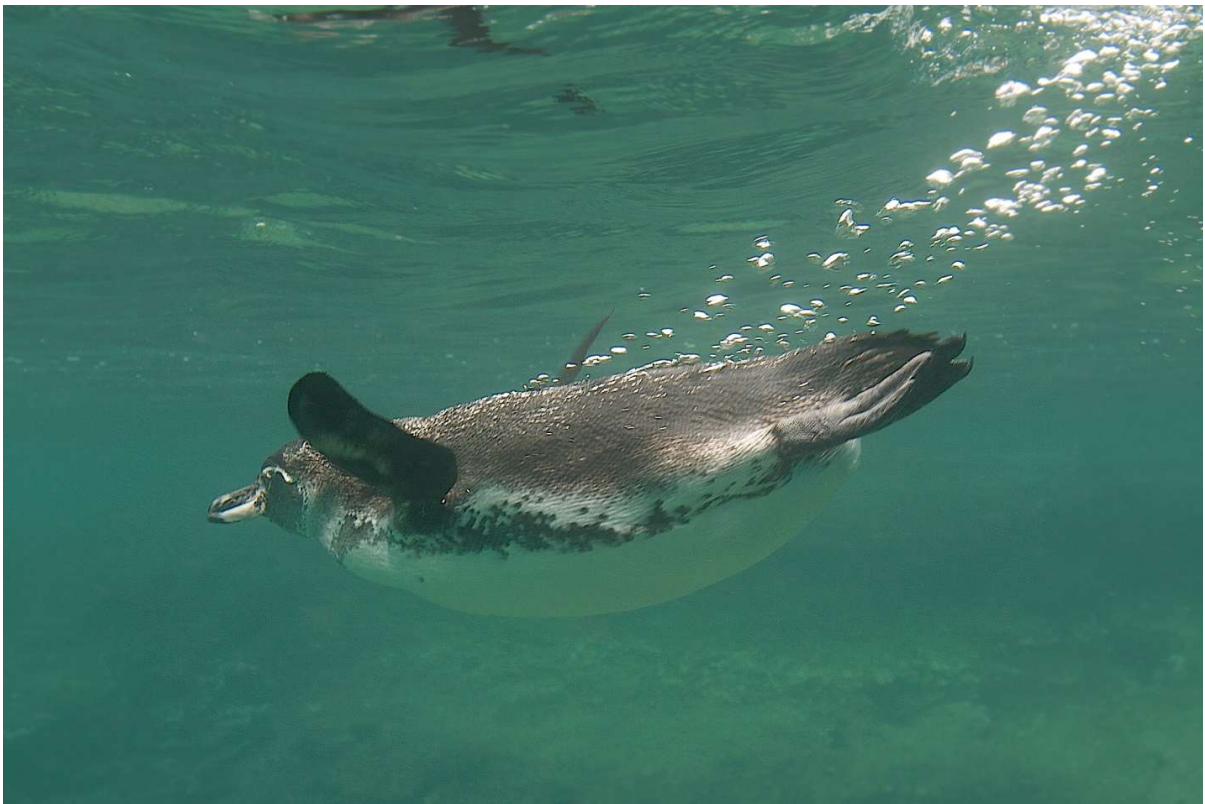
Galápagos Hawk (*Buteo galapagoensis*)

The Galápagos Hawk belongs to the same genus as many of the hawks found in the Americas, Europe and Asia, but because it evolved in the isolated Galápagos, it is far tamer than its relatives. Its plumage varies in color from white and brown to a brilliant yellow and black. The Galápagos Hawk is the major native predator of the archipelago's lizards, including the marine and land iguanas, lava lizards, and other reptiles. It will feed on any rotting carcass. Visitors to the islands may be lucky enough to see hawks up close on several visitation sites, including Punta Espinosa on Fernandina, Punta Suárez on Española, and on Genovesa. They have an interesting breeding system in that the females mate with more than one male, and then they all help with raising the chicks.



Sea lions and marine iguanas inhabit a portion of Fernandina that literally has no vegetation. © 2009 Photo by Ken Weemhoff

This part of the island has virtually no vegetation, just the sand, black lava, and some long-dead trees and pieces of driftwood that the iguanas use for shelter from the sun. The tour moves along the trail, passing groups of sea lions hauled up on the beaches, sometimes sharing the space with the marine iguanas. It continues over the black lava, out to the point where the lava from the last eruption stopped flowing and waves now break over the fresh-looking lava flow. A regal Galápagos hawk may unexpectedly appear, perching high up on a lone, denuded tree trunk close to the trail. Even with 15 people just a few feet away, gawking and snapping photos, a hawk may seem completely nonchalant and unperturbed by the presence of humans.



A penguin flies through the water chasing dinner. © 2011

The walk circles back to the landing site, continuing along the shore where the lava flowed out into a small promontory and formed tide-pools and a small cove. This is the main area where flightless cormorants, lava herons, wandering tattlers, the ubiquitous iguanas, and Galápagos lizards hang out. You

will also see Sally lightfoot crabs scrambling underfoot, while young sea lions enjoy a refreshing, playful swim. The American Oystercatcher, a distinctive shorebird with black and white feathers and a large red beak, is now considered to be an endemic subspecies called “the Galápagos American Oystercatcher.”

If time allows, a late morning snorkel along the shoreline or in among the mangroves can be very rewarding. It is not unusual to come across marine iguanas feeding on algae in the shallows or penguins strutting about the shoreline. The mangroves provide shelter to young green turtles, rays and many species of juvenile fish.



A Flightless Cormorant looks for crabs and other goodies underwater. © 2013

Flightless Cormorant (*Nannopterum harrisi*)

The flightless cormorant is about 1m (3ft) long, but its wings are only about one third the size that would be required for it to fly. These endemic birds are found only on Fernandina and the west coast of Isabela. Scientists believe that, over the millennia, this cormorant gradually lost the ability to fly because of having abundant food sources on the shore and lacking terrestrial predators. Curiously, it still holds up its undeveloped wings to dry in the air, just as other cormorants do. Each pair raises two or three chicks. It is a superb underwater swimmer, like the non-flying penguin. The difference is that the flightless cormorant has powerful legs and webbed feet to propel it through the water in pursuit of fish and small octopuses, while the penguin uses its wings for propulsion.